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CAROLINE SCHLEGEL AND HER FRIENDS


00091970

Published 1913

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MR SHERINGHAM AND OTHERS

LAURA AND TRUDI

I

TWO THOUSAND POUNDS sterling, forty thousand good German Reichsmarks, had been left to Laura Kollin by her godfather, old Herr Weber, and it was so well invested that her godfather's executor and man of business explained to Laura that for the rest of her life it should bring her a safe and certain income of a hundred a year—a hundred pounds, or, as Laura reckoned it, two thousand marks. "Trudi and I have two thousand a year," she had said softly to herself, and aloud to her young sister, over and over again since the miracle had happened.

Laura had been attached to her godfather, and had grieved over the news of his death; but when she heard of the provision he had made for her it seemed as if death, instead of snapping the tie between them, had strengthened it. To his friendship she owed this new sense of comfort and security, and so the old man's sheltering arms, which had always helped her, helped her still. "If Trudi and I both fell ill and could not work we could live on our means," she said,

thus laying the spectre that had risen whenever she was run down or out of spirits. "When I die Trudi will be comfortably off," she thought, and made her will accordingly. For the money had been left at her disposal. She could spend it all in an hour if she chose. Onkel Gottfried, as she called her godfather, had known that she would never spend a shilling foolishly. He had watched the brave fight she made since her parents died twelve years ago and left their two girls beggared.

Now the worst of the fight was over. The sisters between them earned enough to keep their little home together; the three or four rooms on the third floor of a *Gartenhaus* in a quiet street in West Berlin. They were both what Americans call schoolmarms. Laura had qualified when she left school, though at that time she had not expected to work for her living. She had done it because Onkel Gottfried advised her to, and he had fought the necessary battles with her parents. He saw, as she did not, that her parents were living without the least concern for their children's future, spending, speculating, trusting to luck, making no sacrifices to give the girls a dowry, although they lived in a society where girls rarely marry without one. But when Onkel Gottfried said that Laura wished to become a *Lehrerin* her mother was furious, vowed that she hated *Zukunftsmusik*, and that her girls would marry as she had done.

"You came to Karl with a dowry, all of which is spent," said Herr Weber, who knew the family affairs too well for his peace of mind.

"On the contrary," said Frau Kollin, "Karl fell desperately in love with me, and here I am."

But five years after this discussion she was not there, and Karl was not there either. Laura had not married, Trudi, who was ten years younger, had not finished school, and their only heritage was debt and disorder. If it had not been for Onkel Gottfried it must have gone hard with the girls. There were some relations in a distant part of Germany, but they were steady-going thrifty people, and the name of Kollin was taboo amongst them. They did not offer to do anything for Laura and Trudi, who must have been brought up badly, and were probably as silly and extravagant as their parents. They wrote polite letters and advised the girls to stay in Berlin. Onkel Gottfried was a poor man himself—too poor to offer a girl a home. But he took charge of Trudi until she had finished her training, and Laura from the first took charge of herself.

Twelve years ago these things had happened, and a little farther back still other things had happened that shook Laura roughly out of the fool's paradise in which a pretty girl lives. She had been wooed, she had thought she was loved, for the space of a week she had been unofficially engaged. Her mother, a born fool, spread the news in whispers before it was authentic. Laura was going to marry Referendar Reimann, the only son of Justizrath Reimann, *eine glänzende Partie*, " a match of the first brilliance, my dear ; but don't say a word to anyone yet because, although everything is settled and the young man is desperately in love, the two fathers still have to arrange some small details," and so on and so on, in the ear of every gossip in the little town. A gown of great price and elegance was ordered for Laura to put

on at the entertainment Frau Kollin proposed to give in celebration of the event when it became official—was ordered and created. Some of Laura's friends saw the gown at the dressmaker's, but they never saw Laura wear it. The entertainment was never given. At the end of one blissful week Laura was told that the marriage could not take place. Her father could not give her the dowry the Justizrath demanded for his son; could not even promise to furnish for the young couple; could do nothing his style of life promised. With expressed regret and implied contempt the Justizrath and the Referendar departed. No one blamed them, and no one except Onkel Gottfried thought twice about Laura. Her father was absorbed in his financial worries, and her mother was as usual absorbed in herself. A year later both parents died, and since then Laura had put the hopes and dreams of girlhood from her. To earn bread by day and sleep by night she must work with all her strength, and she had done so, not unhappily. Now, thanks to Onkel Gottfried, she had butter to her bread, and at the end of the winter term Trudi and she had gone to Dresden for an Easter holiday.

"Just for once," Trudi had coaxed—"just for once, let us pretend to be rich and young and happy," and Laura, half frightened, but greatly tempted, had given way. They had taken four hundred marks, twenty pounds, with them, and they had spent the whole stupendous sum in three weeks. They had certainly been very extravagant.

That was six weeks ago, but it seemed to both sisters that they had known Privatdocent Caspar

Grote and his mother, Frau Professor Grote, much longer. It was the Frau Professor who had first made friends with them in the Dresden boarding-house. She liked the look and the behaviour of the sisters. They did not seek acquaintances, they were neat and quiet, and the elder one mothered the pretty young one. It was disappointing to find that they were schoolmarms earning their own living. She had not guessed it from their air. But she did not withdraw her countenance, and in an expansive moment Trudi told her about the legacy left to Laura.

"I do not understand that at all," the Frau Professor said heatedly. "Why was half the money not left to you?"

"But, dear Frau Professor, I was not Onkel Gottfried's godchild," said Trudi.

The Frau Professor seemed to think that had nothing to do with it.

"Next Saturday I expect my son," she had said when she had known them about five minutes, and it seemed to Laura that henceforward whatever they did, and whatever they talked of, led sooner or later to the Frau Professor's son. Before Saturday came Laura was tired of them both.

"When the son comes I hope we shall be left more to ourselves again," she said, but Trudi only agreed half-heartedly. She felt fluttered by the thought of Caspar's coming—the incomparable Caspar, who had never given his parents a moment's anxiety, except when he had measles, and of whom his parents expected great things.

"I like Frau Professor," said Trudi.

"I like a little of her," said Laura.

"I like Herr Caspar," said Trudi, when she had known that hero half a day.

"So do I," said Laura, "but I don't believe he will ever do great things."

Six weeks later the sisters had not essentially changed their point of view. Laura still thought the mother a managing, conceited woman, whose exaggerated estimate of her only son made her tedious company. If Caspar had been the phœnix his mother thought him, as an everlasting subject of anecdote and adulation he would still have palled.

"Caspar is a genius," the good Frau Professor would say too seriously, and too often.

But Caspar was not a genius—in Laura's shrewd opinion. He was a worthy pedantic young man, with mild blue eyes and an immense belief in his mother. How any woman could set an aureole around his tow-coloured head passed Laura's understanding. When she compared him with her Referendar! But Trudi seemed to think comparisons were odious. She spent most of her leisure time with her new friends, and never ceased to sing their praises.

However, though Laura was often lonely now she was not unhappy. For twelve years she had been so starved of all she wanted that her additional income opened new worlds to her. She bought new clothes for Trudi and herself when the second quarter was paid, and she took two tickets in the second circle for *The Merchant of Venice*, a play she was studying in English with her class, and greatly desired to see. She did not like it as well in English as in German, and was pleased to think that on the stage she would hear it in her mother-tongue.

"But it is wonderful," she said to Trudi. "For three months this money will give us all the pleasures we want. I count our new clothes a pleasure. They were not exactly a necessity. With a little more careful mending and patching, our old ones——"

"Laura!" cried Trudi. "The old ones were so shabby and out of date that people stared at us in the street."

"I never noticed it. They kept us warm. Still, I shall enjoy seeing you in the new ones, and in wearing my own. We are as well off now as many a young pastor or professor. How wise Onkel Gottfried was to put us in the way of supporting ourselves."

"I would much rather be supported," said Trudi. "I hate teaching."

"I know you do," said Laura anxiously. "But what else is open to you?"

Trudi blushed.

On the whole, the time between Easter and Whitsuntide passed pleasantly and uneventually. At least, on looking back when June came, Laura could not see the landmarks that led to the present situation. In her company Caspar had never made love to Trudi. She could not picture him as a lover at all, or as anything but an amiable, rather stupid young man who took his insufferable mother at her own valuation. Laura supposed the illusion of love prevented Trudi from seeing him in his true colours, but she could only make guesses at her young sister's state of mind. They never discussed Caspar or the Frau Professor now. It was partly Trudi's reticence that told her story. She would come back from her friends with her eyes alight and her cheek aglow, and have never

a word to say of what had put her in such good spirits. To be sure, the young man had offered some instruction in botany that the young woman had accepted with gratitude; but Laura could not understand why Herr Grote, discoursing on funguses, should send Trudi home to her in a happy dream. However, she understood everything better after the Frau Professor's birthday.

This event fell on Whit Monday, when all the pleasure-resorts of Berlin were bound to be inconveniently crowded. Nevertheless, the Grotes decided that, as they always had an expedition and a feast in honour of it, they would have both this year, and invite the sisters to accompany them. That will show you the stage of intimacy reached by the two households. They would not have asked acquaintances to join them on an occasion so intimate and so costly, because the programme could not be carried out for a few pence. They were to take an electric car to the Grünewald, dine at a restaurant there, and after a long day in the country return to Berlin and have supper with the Frau Professor.

Laura would have enjoyed herself very well if she could have walked in the woods with Trudi only, or even alone. But when the loaded electric cars disgorged them, her head ached already with trying to hear and answer a flood of empty babble amidst a din. Frau Grote was a woman who must always be talking, and always of her own affairs. Even these suburban woods were fresh and beautiful on this young June day, and Laura longed to give her mind to them. But she knew that her companion was like the woman, overheard by Heine, who cried, "What do the trees

matter to you ? " when she was asked to have eyes for them : *Was gehen Dir die schöne grüne Bäume an ?* She had to tell Laura all about her birthday presents, and the bunch of lilies of the valley the cook had brought from the market, and the wicked price of asparagus-ends this year, the headless ends the thrifty German housewife buys and puts in her omelets. She hoped Laura liked rhubarb, because there would be rhubarb for supper—Caspar said it agreed with him better than unripe gooseberries, and it was a pleasure to get anything the dear good boy desired. Such a marvellous present he had given her—a true work of art : his photograph, cabinet size, in evening dress, and holding in his right hand his pamphlet on green mould in damp cupboards—a work that had created a sensation, nothing short of a sensation—and next to the photograph the Frau Professor valued Trudi's cushion ; that was a masterpiece, really and truly a masterpiece.

" Alackaday," thought Laura, " now Trudi is to be set up for adulation next to Caspar. What does it all mean ? I foresee that I shall soon think Trudi a bore. Embroidery is not her pastime at all, and the stems of her flowers were broken-backed—but where is Trudi, and where is Herr Grote ? "

" I don't see Trudi and Herr Grote," said she. " I thought they were just behind."

Frau Grote, who carried a large oblong green tin holding rolls and sausage for a " snack " at eleven o'clock, looked unperturbed.

" We have the food with us," she said.

" But where can they be ? They must be hungry too."

" Your sister is with my son. You may feel quite easy about her. Caspar, perhaps, prefers to eat a trifle at a *Restauration.* He considers *al fresco* meals a little undignified. My blessed husband did too. But he has been so long dead, and I have been so long used to turn round every penny and make it do service as two—how easy life would be, Fräulein Kollin, if it could be carried on without money!—Allow me to offer you a slice of brown bread and liver-sausage—if we had nothing to consider but poetry and romance—I am a highly romantic nature—and so is my Caspar—but we also have to consider what is due to our position—have we not ? "

Laura, who was hungry, ate brown bread and butter and liver-sausage with satisfaction, but she did not feel at all satisfied about Trudi. It was out of the question that Caspar's handkerchief should be thrown to her with his mother's approval. A man of his matrimonial value might once in a thousand years choose a penniless girl, but never since the world began had a Frau Professor encouraged such folly. Caspar Grote ! a sane, sound young man with steady work and hopes of advancement. He must—Laura saw it herself—he must marry a girl who could furnish the flat, buy the house linen, and add a solid sum to the small yearly income. He would find such a girl at a moment's notice whenever he chose. The young couple would have three or four rooms, perhaps one small cheap servant, and would do all the washing at home. Laura knew just the kind of *ménage* it would be, and thought of it without enthusiasm. But it was beyond Trudi's reach. She would never marry—as Laura had never married—and she must

be saved the heartbreak that had ended Laura's youth when she was deserted by her Referendar.

"I am not happy about Trudi lately," she said to Frau Grote. "She says so often that she does not like teaching, and yet she will have to teach all her life."

"She says it to me, too," said Frau Grote.

"I wish she did not get such ideas into her head."

"They are natural ideas. Trudi is young and pretty."

"But she must earn her bread."

"Trudi is womanly and domestic. She would like a home of her own."

"Every woman would," said Laura. "But many of us have to make one for ourselves—as best we can."

"It is never the same thing. Trudi said quite frankly the other day that she hoped she would not be an old maid."

"Every girl hopes it; but there is no other fate before most girls of our class who have no money. I think that women should make themselves more independent of marriage. There are other things in life if you have eyes and ears—and a little money."

"But you say that Trudi has no money."

"What is mine is Trudi's."

"I felt sure you would say so," cried the Frau Professor. "Here come our children—beaming with happiness. How I envy you, dear Fräulein Kollin, to have such power in your hands, and to use it nobly!"

II

Laura did not answer Frau Grote just then, partly because the young people came up to them and partly because she felt chilled by the lady's effusiveness. It would certainly have been ignoble if she had not shared with Trudi as long as they lived together. She wished her sister's happiness did not seem so much bound up with these two people, one of whom she did not like much, while she thought the other wanting in backbone. But the intimacy would probably cool down if she explained clearly that Trudi had no money of her own. She did not like having to do this, because ostensibly the Grotes were not concerned with Trudi's financial position; but in her quality of elder sister she made up her mind, as she watched Trudi coming from the wood towards them, that she would sacrifice delicacy to safety. Trudi should be guarded from heartbreak; and as Laura watched Caspar mop his face with a large handkerchief and gobble up liver-sausage with brown bread, she thought he was not a man to move a pretty girl's heart. The trouble was that when she watched Trudi she did not feel sure. Trudi's face was glowing with youth and happiness, and it was not only the summer day that beautified her. She looked like a girl who sees the heaven she desires within her reach, and the attraction she feels reflected in her lover's eyes. But had he grit enough to defy his redoubtable mother and marry a girl without a penny? Laura could not believe it of him. He was certainly paying court to Trudi this morning, but it gave Laura no

pleasure to watch him. She began to dread the long history of a day that was not half over yet, and in which there was time for irremediable mischief.

However, she could do nothing to shorten it, and not much to alter the programme. When the "second breakfast" was finished, they all walked in the woods together, and Laura tried to keep her sister with her. But that did not succeed long. Caspar found an important little family of toadstools to which he called Trudi's attention, and which detained them some time. Laura, who could not pretend to be interested in toadstools, walked on with the Frau Professor.

"How true it is that we live again in our children!" the lady sighed. "The first time that I saw you and your sister I said to myself, 'There, now, other things being favourable, would be a wife for my Caspar.'"

Laura, her heart beating with anxiety, knew that a critical moment had come, and that she must try to meet it wisely.

"What exactly do you mean by other things being favourable'?" she asked. "I should have thought that Herr Grote——"

"Call him Caspar."

"Not yet."

"The dear good boy, so eminent in his work, so peaceable, so *solid*——"

"Yes, I am sure he is *solid*," said Laura. "He looks it."

"So easily pleased."

"Oh, well——" said Laura.

"But, my best one, the daughter of Consul Gruber adored him—if you could have heard her sing *Du*

meine Wonne, du meine Lust, with her eyes glued on his face, if you could only have heard her! And she will have sixty thousand marks on her wedding-day—with more to come—for she is an only daughter, and her father did well in South America."

"Then—why——" ventured Laura.

"That is what I said to my Caspar morning, noon, and night. Why? I promised him that he would find much comfort in sixty thousand marks—with more to come—and soon get used to his wife's eyes."

"Is there anything unusual about the young lady's eyes?"

"One looks right and the other left. Moreover, one is green and the other brown; but that I consider distinguished. Also, she is not as well made as a Venus, and she has red hair. You see, I conceal nothing from you, my dear Fräulein Kollin, and I own that I desired the marriage. But then we came to Dresden and saw your sister, and ever since Caspar has said that he insists on a wife with eyes that match. I let the boy talk—and I am not mercenary—but I am practical. Someone concerned must be practical on these occasions, and Caspar's wife must bring something with her—if it is only forty thousand marks."

"Forty thousand marks!"

"It is the least we could accept—a young man as eligible as my Caspar—he will probably be a professor before he is forty."

"Trudi has no money at all," said Laura plainly. "Didn't you know that, Frau Professor?"

"I thought it might be a matter of arrangement."

"How can you arrange what is not there? Our parents did not leave us a penny."

"But you have money."

"I have a little—enough to keep us from destitution in our old age."

"In your old age you will have a State pension."

"Added to my own income it will be enough."

"You said just now that what was yours was Trudi's."

So this was where Frau Grote was leading—to an attack on her money—the little hoard left by Onkel Gottfried to lighten the present and to save his god-child from the miseries of poverty-stricken old age.

"You can't suppose that I am going to give my money to Herr Grote?" she cried.

"To your sister—at marriage. Why not? It is what parents do every day for their children. I see no reason against it."

"I see a thousand," said Laura.

The Frau Professor showed what she could look like when she was angry and offended. Every inch of her bristled.

"I am afraid we have wasted our time," she said. "Poor Trudi! It is she who will suffer!"

This barefaced admission that Trudi was to be thrown aside like an old glove the moment she was known to have no dowry roused Laura's indignation, although she knew both from experience and hearsay that dowerless girls could not expect to marry.

"I suppose you can depend on your son," she said. "He will take your advice?"

"Of course he will. Only yesterday I warned the

dear boy not to let his heart become too deeply engaged until I had made a few inquiries."

"I suppose you had a dowry when you married?" Laura permitted herself to ask.

"But my best one! a *Mitgift* of thirty thousand marks in solid money, besides the furniture and the house linen. From the moment I was born my parents pinched and put by for me. I approached the altar with self-respect,"

"In England and America it is the men who approach it with self-respect," said Laura.

"In Germany it is both parties," said the Frau Professor. "Our ideals are higher than those of other nations, and our civilisation puts the rest of the world to shame. We are indeed the salt of the earth."

Laura did not try to carry on the argument. She knew that Frau Grote was one of those people who expect noisy assertion to convince, and self-praise to dazzle others. The rest of the day passed in tension and discomfort. Just before dinner the mother and son were by themselves for a short time, and when they all sat down together Caspar's manner had undergone a change. Not a subtle one either. His jokes had dried up, his spirits were blighted, his mild eyes avoided Trudi. The meal that should have been a festival was as gloomy as a funeral banquet, and the Frau Professor's health was drunk to phrases that had no warmth or life in them. All reference to the future was avoided, and long before they got up from table poor Trudi understood that her prospects had fallen to pieces like a house of cards. It was a cruel business, cruelly carried out, thought

Laura. She wished she could take her sister home.

But the day's pleasure was not over yet. After dinner, according to the programme, they walked slowly through the woods to another restaurant, just far enough off to give them an appetite for their afternoon coffee. Cheerfulness had vanished, and even harmony, for Frau Grote was a child of nature, and had no idea of keeping her tongue or her temper within bounds. She made herself as unpleasant as she could, and treated the sisters as if they were intruders and simpletons. If Caspar tried to take their part, she made him repent it, and he soon left off trying. She insisted on clinging to his arm, while he carried her sunshade, and when they got to the restaurant she chose a table in a corner because the chairs were so arranged that she could place him between herself and a large tree. He could see Trudi, but he could not say anything to her that his mother did not hear. The garden was very full, and while they drank the coffee Frau Grote looked about her in search of acquaintances. For some time her curiosity was not rewarded, but all of a sudden she showed signs of excitement. She craned her neck and waved her hand, and settled her bonnet and her coat. Then she turned to Caspar.

"Those people at the next table are in my way," she said. "If they moved a little I could see beyond them. They are most inconsiderate."

"But, *Mamachen*," urged Caspar, "they cannot guess that you want to see beyond them."

"Perhaps if you took my chair you could see better," said Trudi.

"Certainly I could," snapped the Frau Professor. "I should have asked you to change long ago, but in these days elders have no rights."

Trudi got up, looking, as she had done for some hours now, quite dazed by this sudden storm on her horizon. Caspar looked as miserable as she did. Laura wished again that she could take Trudi straight away.

"It is! It is!" cried the Frau Professor, in a frenzy of pleasure and self-congratulation. "They have returned from Italy, where they have been spending the spring in all the best hotels. Look, Caspar!"

Caspar looked, and apparently remained unmoved.

"Grubers," he said laconically. But his mother pointed out the new arrivals to Laura—a prosperous-looking man, a stout handsomely dressed woman, and a red-haired girl, slightly hump-backed, and on the way to be as stout as her mother.

"Consul Gruber," she said, "and Frau Consul, and my sweet Lenchen—so altered—so improved. They came back through Paris, and no doubt her hat and her gown—but money can do anything—where there is a charming complexion and expression. Come, Caspar, we must go at once and bid them welcome back to the Fatherland. Fräulein Kollin, you will excuse us."

With an offensively cool nod Frau Grote got up and left the table. Willy-nilly, Caspar followed her. The sisters looked at each other.

"Odious woman," said Laura.

"But what has happened?" cried Trudi.

"Let us go home. I can talk to you better there."

Her tone struck a chill to Trudi's heart. She looked at her sister's worn face, thought of her lost youth, and felt as frightened of the fate before her as life feels of death.

"He loves me," she murmured.

"What is the good?" said Laura. "Love doesn't count. Nothing counts but money. I found it so, and you must too, I fear."

"But they have known from the beginning that I had no money," said Trudi.

"We will think no more of them," said Laura; and as she spoke she saw Caspar coming towards their table, and Trudi's face flushed with eager hope. But he had not broken away from his mother. His first words explained that he came as her ambassador. Would the ladies excuse them? These old friends—and a double celebration—their return to Berlin—and his mother's birthday—nothing would satisfy the Frau Consul but a dinner in town—at a smart restaurant—he, Caspar, would have preferred a quiet evening—but when his mother insisted—on her birthday——"

"We quite understand, Herr Grote," said Laura, and dismissed him. Her scorn of him showed in her eyes as she watched him shuffle away.

"But he can't help it!" cried Trudi. "His mother has always tyrannised over him, and she won't give him a penny. He can't marry on seventy-five pounds a year; and that is all he makes."

"I wish we had never seen them," said Laura.

Trudi began to cry, not noisily so as to call attention to her grief, but softly and sadly. She knew that unless a miracle happened darkness had closed in on her.

III

The worst of it was that Laura understood exactly. She, too, had breasted this sea of trouble and had felt the waves close over her. She had known what it was to be happy one hour and miserable the next, to accept defeat without striking a blow, and to behave like a wooden image, though she suffered as Trudi was suffering now, cruelly and innocently.

So the joy of life was extinguished in the little home, for the elder sister could not be happy while the younger one watched and waited, her whole system tense with hope and longing that were not fulfilled, her health slowly undermined by disappointment. Trudi tried to call pride to the rescue; but pride is armour, and she was wounded. She threw it from her when she felt the hurt unbearable. Why should they break off all relations with the Grotes in this abrupt off-handed way? she asked. Why should a single disagreeable episode weigh against the long course of friendship preceding it?

"Do you mean that you want to go and see them?" said Laura.

"I think we might."

"It is Frau Grote's business to come here—and excuse herself if she can."

"Perhaps she is ill."

"She is not ill. I saw her yesterday at Wertheimer's."

"You saw her, Laura—and you never told me."

"There is nothing to tell. We were both buying theatre tickets, and suddenly saw each other. She

said ' Good-day, Fräulein Kollin ' in such a disagreeable way that I just bowed and did not speak at all. That fat red-haired girl was with her."

" Caspar always said his mother was good at the core," said Trudi.

" Through such a rind the core is not worth reaching," said Laura.

She had taken tickets for a cheap afternoon performance of *Fleischmann als Erzieher*, a play about school life that had a professional interest for them. But, unfortunately, the Grotes and the red-haired girl sat in the same circle, well within their view, and Trudi was more interested in them than in the stage. After the second act they went out with the rest of the audience to have refreshments in the garden, but they could not find seats or get a waiter to serve them. In the end Laura fetched two cups of coffee from the buffet herself, and brought them to the corner where her sister stood.

" I have seen them," Trudi whispered excitedly. " In the theatre it is dark—but out here—and she is not pretty—and he is not happy—and she giggles—he hates girls who giggle—stupid little geese he calls them."

" But when stupid little geese have money men marry them," said Laura.

" If only I could know," moaned Trudi. " I shall die if I don't know."

But as time went on Laura began to fear that her little sister would die because she did know ; for Trudi one day took her fate in her hands and went to see the Grotes. She came back with her fate sealed. In the son's presence the mother had alluded to his approaching marriage, and he had not contradicted her. There

was no possibility of error, no loophole for one of those romantic misunderstandings that in the world of romance part lovers for a short adventurous period. Caspar had been there, flatly and silently there, and he had avoided Trudi's eyes.

The girl had not Laura's strength, it seemed, any more than she had Laura's energy and discrimination. She was one of those tender clinging women who fulfil the ordinary masculine ideal and who flourish when they wed the mate who suits them. She would have found happiness in service if she could have served husband and children, but she found neither help nor happiness in her school work. To cut short a story that Laura felt as long as pain, poor Trudi pined. Her sorrow slowly killed her.

"I must take her away," said Laura, when the summer holidays came.

"Yes, yes," said the doctor she consulted. "Try change of air and scene."

So Laura took Trudi to Rügen and spent more than she could afford, and brought her sister back worse than she went. They had some bad weather; Trudi caught a cold that left a cough. You could explain all her symptoms by combining her bodily "tendencies," a thin gown, and a thunder-storm. The doctor did so to his own satisfaction, but not to Laura's. She knew why Trudi was as thin as a herring, and why she sobbed in her sleep.

"But it happened to me, and I got over it," she said wistfully one day.

"But, Laura—you had only known him a week," said Trudi; and after a little pause she went on—"I wonder if Caspar is married yet."

Laura had often wondered too. They had not even received the printed announcement of his engagement that Germans send to their friends, and she thought that the Frau Professor would have seen that one was sent to them. A week or two later, when Caspar Grote overtook her in the Thiergarten and seemed to wish to speak to her, she bluntly asked him if he was married.

"I am not even engaged," he said.

"Were you refused, then?" said Laura. Her manners were what Germans call *derb* sometimes: what we call brusque.

"If you do not ask you cannot be refused. A son has duties to his mother, but——"

"I have looked on at life a good deal," said Laura, "and I observe that when we wish to behave badly we can always put it down to duty."

"But, *gnädiges Fräulein*, a mother."

"A mother is not everyone."

"My mother is very determined."

"I cannot discuss your mother with you, Herr Grote. I cannot forgive either of you, and after to-day we will meet as strangers."

"But, *gnädiges Fräulein*, I did what I could. That afternoon, when Trudi had left us, I opened my heart to my mother for the first time. I said to her, '*Mutti*' —I always call her *Mutti* when I am deeply moved —I said, '*Mutti*, either I marry Trudi Kollin or I die unwed.' I behaved like a man, I assure you."

Laura took a long look at the boyish face now making its appeal to her; for Caspar, with his learning and his pedantry, was a boy in years and in experience.

"So you really are fond of Trudi," she said.

"If you knew how I have suffered—— he began, but Laura interrupted him indignantly.

"You—you!" she cried; and then the thought of Trudi and the picture of her rose in such force that she stopped speaking.

"How is Trudi?" said Caspar.

"She is dying," said Laura.

"Yes!" she went on, for the young man turned white with the shock of what he heard, but did not open his mouth. "Yes! They used to call it a broken heart. Now they use various fine names all beginning with *neur*; but I don't think they make it easier to bear—or to see."

Still the young man did not speak, but Laura saw that his mild blue eyes were full of tears.

"Couldn't you have left her alone—you and your mother?" she asked passionately. "She hadn't all she wanted, but she had some things. Now she wants the moon, and I can't get it for her."

"But, *gnädiges Fräulein*," said Caspar, finding his tongue, "my mother assures me that you could get it for her quite easily—that is to say, if I am the moon."

Laura looked at him, first with inquiry and then with a flash of understanding. She had become so used to the idea of his marriage to Lenchen Gruber and her three thousand pounds that she had hardly considered the sacrifice of her own poor two thousand, once asked and once refused. Just as she was going to ask Caspar to explain himself, they were interrupted by the Frau Professor, who bore down on them from a side-walk looking as large and formidable as ever. The sudden sight of her stirred Laura in a way she could not have foreseen, and made her act in a way

she did not approve when she looked back at the agitating moment. Anger mastered her; she stiffened as she spoke to Caspar, and her voice was as haughty as her glance, met now by both mother and son.

"If your mother has proposals to make she must come and see me," she said. "I would do a great deal for Trudi."

Then she walked away without waiting to speak to Frau Grote; and she resisted the temptation she felt to tell Trudi that she had met Caspar and spoken to him. But she contrived to let her sister hear, through other people, that he was not betrothed to Lenchen Gruber. For a little while the news acted like a miracle, but not for long. Frau Grote did not arrive; Laura began to think she was implacable; and Trudi was affected by her sister's disappointment, although it was unspoken. For Laura had come to wish for the marriage at any price; but she still felt that, after what had happened, the advances must come from the other side. She had done all a self-respecting woman could do when she had told Caspar to send his mother to see her.

When Christmas came no hope and pleasure came with it to the sisters. They trimmed themselves a little tree and they bought each other presents; but though their circumstances were easier than last year their hearts were as heavy as lead. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, before the tree was lighted, Laura was sitting by herself in great depression of mind. She had persuaded Trudi to lie down so as to be strong enough for the evening with its small ripple of excitement and extra exertion, for everything tired Trudi now and left her weaker than before. The room was

half-dark already, but Laura did not light the lamp. The scent of the tree and of the little wax candles and painted toys on it belonged to Christmas as she had known it all her life, and her thoughts went back to past ones. Trudi had always been with her since that year when, as a little girl of ten, she had been allowed to hold up her baby sister to see her first lighted tree. She could not face life without Trudi. It would be empty and forlorn.

There was a ring at the bell, and Laura went to the door—for the sisters kept no servant. A charwoman did all they needed done for them in the morning hours. A large breathless figure panted on the threshold, but found means to make her voice conciliatory as she asked to come in. Laura led Frau Grote to the room in which she had been sitting, and said nothing till the door was closed. She did not want Trudi to be roused.

"You are surprised to see me," said Frau Grote.

Laura offered her visitor a chair, sat down herself, and waited for a further opening.

"I am a most unhappy woman," Frau Grote went on. "Have you seen my son lately?"

"I saw him yesterday in the Potsdamer Strasse."

"He says you never speak when you meet now."

"I have nothing to say to your son."

"But have you observed how pale and thin he looks?"

"No, Frau Professor. You cannot expect me to care what colour Herr Grote is or how much he weighs."

"He is my only child—all I have in the world."

"Trudi is my only sister—and I was just thinking——"

"So was I—as I trimmed our tree—next Christmas—we should never forgive ourselves, Fräulein Kollin."

"I should never forgive you," said Laura.

"But, my dear child—I still maintain that the young couple cannot live on what Caspar earns. I can spare a little, but not much."

"I would spare all I have to keep Trudi alive."

"But at Whitsuntide you refused——"

"At Whitsuntide Trudi was quite well. I did not know she was going to be so silly."

"They are both silly, but they are all we have," said Frau Grote. "Can we not see Trudi?"

"You can see her if you wish," said Laura, and she lighted a lamp. As it burned up she perceived that the Frau Professor was fidgeting with her reticule and looked decidedly embarrassed.

"Caspar is waiting downstairs," she said. "He refused to let me come alone. He said he could bear the suspense no longer. He gave me ten minutes to arrange everything with you, Fräulein Kollin, and then he is coming to join us."

"Very well," said Laura.

"You consent—I knew you would—to make our dear ones happy."

"I have not the least desire to make Caspar happy or to impoverish myself for his sake," said Laura. "Unfortunately, I cannot pull Trudi out of the grave without smoothing the way for him."

"The very words I used this morning in speaking of our dear Trudi," said the Frau Professor.

"Then we had better shake hands and consider the matter settled," said Laura. But the Frau Professor evidently had something more to say. However,

before she spoke again the bell rang, and Laura had to open the door to Caspar. As she ushered him in she saw that Trudi had been roused and had entered the room by another door.

"A Happy Christmas," said the young man, going straight up to her and keeping her hands in his.

"Look at them," whispered Frau Grote to Laura; "I am not at all sentimental, Fräulein Kollin. I know that life without money is hard, and I wanted it for my son. But he says that his fees are increasing, and I will do what I can. If you will give your sister twenty thousand marks and her outfit I will furnish their flat."

"It's a deal," said Laura, and went up to her sister and kissed her; for though the prose of life was on her lips as she bargained with Frau Grote, all the joy and poetry of it was in her heart as she watched Trudi's face.

A CHANCE ENCOUNTER

A YOUNG man of handsome presence was walking through the forest of Züringen from Plaue to Bertholdsruhe. He had only arrived at Plaue the night before, and he had expected to go on to-day to the castle of Wieden, where he had an appointment of importance. But as he sat at supper yesterday, a telegram was handed to him that suddenly changed his plans. "Melanie has left home," it ran. "I leave to-night. Must ask you to postpone your visit."

It certainly was a surprising telegram, and Otto von Ilsenberg had read it and re-read it. This morning, in the silent centre of the forest, he looked at it again. "Melanie has left home." But what possible reason could Melanie have for leaving home, when she knew that Otto von Ilsenberg was on his way to her with marriage for his purpose? The affair was as good as settled, and had been arranged in a sensible way between Otto and old Adalbert von Wieden, the girl's grandfather and guardian. Otto's father had broached the subject two years ago, and Otto had said he would think it over. Then his father died, and it was old Adalbert who urged on the match. Otto was not averse to it. In the long line of his ancestry there

had twice been marriages between Ilsenbergs and Wiedens, and the two families had many traditions in common of friendship and adventure. Melanie had money, and was a reported beauty. Everything seemed to promise well; and at a time when the Court was in mourning, and life at Bertholdsruhe rather dull, Otto got leave, and set out to pay his respects to his appointed bride. He had never seen her, and he had not even asked for her photograph or offered his own. In his letters the old Baron treated the girl's point of view as a negligible quantity. He was chiefly concerned, it seemed, about the pecuniary prospects of the next generation, and the young man had replied in the tone set by the older one. He did not know much about girls, for he had no sisters. He supposed they all "wanted to get married," and he hoped this one would be cast in the Madonna mould he admired. He thought he liked a meek, rather silent woman, and that he would dislike a spitfire. He meant to make a good husband. But just as he was on his way to her, full of pleasant expectation and resolve, she had "left home." It was inexplicable.

The pass through the forest was a lonely one, and Otto had been told at Plaue that it had a bad reputation. It led to the borderland of a little kingdom that was not as flourishing or as well governed as the Duchy of Züringen, and it had been infested lately by tramps coming from the kingdom to the Duchy in search of alms and even of victims. There had been several robberies on the pass, and one bad case of personal violence; and it was now lonelier than ever, because people would go a long way round to avoid it.

In the course of an hour Otto was twice accosted by ugly-looking ruffians, but he carried a stout stick, and was tall and sturdy, and though they scowled and cursed as he passed them, they did not molest him. Presently, when the sun grew hot overhead, he called a halt, and sat down to smoke in the shade. There was a thick undergrowth of bracken and bilberry that hid him, though he could see up and down a length of the zig-zag road. He had finished a cigarette and was about to go on, when a girl turned the corner of the road beneath him, and he waited and watched her. She was not a peasant girl. As she came near he observed that she walked slowly, as if she was tired, and she looked from side to side as if she was afraid, and, though her feet lagged, her face was anxious and flurried. She wore a thin white frock, rather stained and crumpled, and a long gold chain set with jewels, that gleamed in the sun. She was small and young and very pretty, with dark eyes, and a quantity of soft brown hair. Otto waited for her companions to overtake her, but none appeared. He felt afraid to stir lest he should startle her, but as she passed he heard a heavy slouching step in the opposite direction, and a tramp, with a heavy stick in his hand, came straight towards her. The girl looked this way and that, stood still, turned back, and ran headlong into the forest on the other side of the road. Otto got up, and by the time he reached the road the tramp had disappeared into the forest. There was a cry of fright and pain, and as Otto crashed forward he saw the girl try to take off her chain, and then hurriedly put up her hands to guard her head and face from the ruffian's uplifted stick. The sight was one to wing

any man's feet, and Otto was in time to bring down his own stick on the threatening arm. With a howl of surprise and pain the man took to his heels. The girl sat down and began to cry.

"'Tis better than fainting," thought Otto, and he leaned against a tree and waited. The girl held her handkerchief to her eyes, but she glanced over it at Otto now and then, and as soon as her sobs subsided she thanked him.

"He hit me once," she said with a shudder. "If you had not come he would have hit me again."

"Did he hurt you?" said Otto anxiously.

The girl took off her thin suède glove, and there on her hand was the red mark of the blow.

"I wish I had him here," said Otto.

The girl glanced at him again. He was tall and broad-shouldered; he had a pleasant voice, and he carried himself like a soldier.

"Where does this road lead to?" she said.

"To Bertholdsruhe. Didn't you see the signpost at the cross-roads?"

"I came out of the forest," said the girl, speaking in disjointed phrases and with lowered eyelids. "I want to get to Fichtenstadt—I took the right road last night—but I thought I knew a short cut—and it was such a dark night——"

"Do you mean to say that you have been wandering about the forest all night?" interrupted Otto.

The girl blushed.

"Yes," she said; "I left home last night."

"You left home last night?"

The familiar phrase hammered at Otto's brain, and

carried the absurd, astonishing truth into his mind. This was Melanie von Wieden.

"People do leave home sometimes," she faltered. "There is nothing odd about that, is there?"

"I have seen young ladies leave home with their friends and luggage," said Otto pensively. "I don't know that I ever met one before who left by herself—at night—without any trunks."

"I saw the sun rise; it was beautiful," said Melanie.

"Don't you think you had better go home again—and get some luggage?" said Otto. "I daresay I could help you find the way."

The girl sprang to her feet, and was off amongst the trees like a frightened hare. Otto called to her to stop, but he had to follow her and keep abreast of her before she would give ear to him.

"I won't go back," she said breathlessly.

"All right," said Otto. "I am not proposing to carry you back, you know. It is probably a long way."

"It is at Wieden," said the young lady.

"I have heard of Schloss Wieden," said Otto.

"I live there—with my grandfather—at least, I have lived there for the last six weeks—since I left school."

"And has your grandfather no carriages or servants—or trunks—at your service?"

"How can I get to Fichtenstadt?" said the little lady, with her chin in the air.

"I will take you there," said Otto. "You mustn't try to run away from me again. If you do I shall run after you. I suppose you are going to friends who expect you?"

"I haven't a friend in Züringen; but I have two enemies, and I'm escaping from them. If you would rather not help me we will part here."

"I have just told you we are not going to part till you are safely at Fichtenstadt—or Bertholdsruhe," said Otto.

"The enemies are probably at Bertholdsruhe by this time," said the girl. "They might see me."

"What would they do?"

"One of them would marry me to the other. Now, perhaps, you can understand why I didn't wait for trunks?"

"Is he—the other—so objectionable, then?" said Otto.

They were on the high road again by this time, and were still about an hour's walk from a village with a telegraph station and an inn.

"I have only seen the man's letters," said the girl. "They were most objectionable."

"Are you sure—he meant them to be?" said Otto, taken aback.

"If he didn't he's a fool," said the girl; "and when it comes to marriage, I don't know that there is much to choose between a fool and a knave."

"Perhaps not," sighed Otto.

"You see, he took it all for granted; took me and my consent for granted."

"But he may have meant well," said Otto.

"Never asked what I was like—never asked if I wanted to marry him—wrote about money. I had hardly heard the man's name till yesterday, when my grandfather showed me the letters, and said my future husband would arrive that evening."

"It does sound rather sudden," admitted Otto, stealing glances at the girl's profile as he walked by her side. "What did you say?"

"I refused to entertain the idea, and I called grandfather a heartless tyrant. He had just called me a goose, so of course I felt annoyed. We both have the Wieden temper, and we both lost it."

"I think in your place I should have had a look at the young man," said Otto.

"I might have done if grandfather had kept his temper," said Melanie. "The truth is, I had all the letters in my hand, and I threw them at his desk rather suddenly; and there was an open window and a wind, and instead of hitting the desk——"

"They hit your grandfather," suggested Otto.

"Yes; and then he actually boxed my ears. You see I haven't run away for a trifle."

"There certainly seems to have been some provocation," said Otto.

"So I walked out of the house just as I was—and here I am."

"Yes," said Otto, "here you are; but where are you going? Your grandfather is probably in pursuit already, and the police too."

"In the end he can't *force* me to marry this Otto von Ilsenberg," said Melanie.

"Otto von Ilsenberg!" cried her companion. "I know him well."

The girl looked up in dismay, but Otto's steady, honest eyes seemed to reassure her.

"I'm a goose and a chatterbox," she said; "but I believe you are neither. You know him? Which is he, then—more fool or more knave?"

"That's a difficult question to answer," said Otto. "But I am sure if he knows of your aversion to the marriage he will retire at once."

"You wouldn't say so if you had seen his letters," said the girl gloomily.

They had come to the top of the pass now, and were looking down a long valley, and at the further end of it Otto saw the roofs of the village where he expected to find a decent inn and a telegraph station. He let her last remark go, and trudged on at her side for some time without speaking; but presently he stopped in front of a bush covered with wild roses, and he gathered two or three deep pink ones and offered them to her. She coloured with pleasure, and tucked them into her belt.

"I don't suppose *he* ever gathered a rose in his life," she said.

"He is rather a friend of mine," said Otto; "and he is not a bad sort, really. Not very romantic, perhaps, when he wrote those letters, but the romance would have come when he saw you."

"How do you know?"

"Because ever since we met I have been wishing Otto's chance had been mine," said the young man boldly.

The girl blushed.

"He never had a chance," she said. "By the way, what does he look like?"

"We are often mistaken for each other," said her companion.

She glanced at him and turned silent, as if his reply gave her cause for thought. He saw that she was white and tired, though no complaint passed her lips;

and he talked to her of the inn and of the long rest they would have there.

"I shall telegraph to Bertholdsruhe for a carriage," he said. "You shall not walk a step beyond the village."

"But my grandfather and Otto von Ilsenberg may be at Bertholdsruhe," said the girl. "Suppose they see us?"

"It would give me great pleasure to meet your grandfather," said Otto.

"But what would you say to him?"

"I should say—will you promise not to be angry if I tell you what I should say?"

Melanie von Wieden nodded and waited. The young man had stopped for a moment under the shade of some trees, and she stopped too. He looked eager and smiling and a little uncertain, and as she met his glance her own drooped.

"I should say, 'Baron, I have the honour to ask for your granddaughter's hand in marriage.'"

The girl started and stared, and turned as pink as the roses in her belt.

"But you woo like a whirlwind," she cried. "We haven't known each other four hours. And, oh! how can you say you are like Otto von Ilsenberg?"

"Your grandfather would be easily persuaded——"

"You evidently don't know him——"

"But what would your answer be?"

"In the end I shall have to do as my grandfather bids me," said the girl. "Last night I felt very brave, but then I was in a rage. I wish a rage didn't ooze away. I haven't the heart of a mouse this afternoon."

"Don't evade me," said the young man, holding one of her hands in his. "Give me my answer now, and I'll encounter your grandfather."

The girl lifted her eyes slowly, and studied his face for some time before she spoke.

"Save me from Otto von Ilsenberg," she whispered at last.

He drew her to him with a little sound of triumph.

"But I am not sure that I can do that," he said.

"I shall have to see him sometimes?"

"I am afraid it is inevitable."

"Well—he will know I ran away rather than marry him. It will do him good to know he is a coxcomb."

"You will soon cure him of that, no doubt," said Otto rather ruefully.

And then they journeyed on and came to the village, and Melanie ate and drank and slept, and left her lover to make any arrangements he pleased. If he had proposed to travel on a moonbeam she would have given her attention to his eyes, and consented to follow where he led. When she had slept for a couple of hours she came down into a vine-covered arbour, where he awaited her, and she found that he had spent a good deal of his time at the telegraph office, and had ordered a carriage from Bertholdsruhe, and that his plans were otherwise unformed. He would not let her talk of anything so matter-of-fact as plans. He made love, as she told him again, like a whirlwind. Perhaps that is why neither of them noticed the sound of carriage wheels, or even the approach of footsteps through the garden. They were at any rate unpleasantly startled by a low chuckle and the sudden

appearance of a very old gentleman, who wore a palpable wig, and carried a gold snuffbox in his hand.

"My congratulations!" said the old gentleman.

"Grandfather!" exclaimed Melanie, springing to her feet. "This gentleman — this gentleman and I——"

"Will you consent to our marriage?" interrupted Otto brusquely.

He stood a little behind the girl, so she did not see the look of understanding he exchanged with her grandfather.

"Yes, I will," said Baron von Wieden. "Take her and keep her—the sooner the better."

A touch of the Wieden temper blazed in Melanie's eyes as she heard her grandfather's most unexpected reply.

"For shame!" she cried. "You throw me at people's heads. What can this gentleman think, when he sees that you are in such a hurry to get rid of me?"

"Who is this gentleman?"

"I—don't—know," stammered Melanie.

The old baron looked at the girl with a grim smile, but he spoke severely.

"So you'll marry the man you pick up on the high road, though you refuse to look at the man I present to you. It is I who cry shame, ungrateful, self-wiiled girl."

Melanie's eyes were full of tears, but she took courage as she felt her lover draw her hand through his arm.

"This gentleman saved my life," she sobbed; "he beat off a tramp who threatened to murder me—he has

been kind to me all day—we have been together for hours—he says he likes me——"

"Loves you," amended Otto.

"H—m," growled the old baron; "and do you *like* him?"

"Who could help it?" sighed Melanie.

"Then ask him his name, you little fool, and tell me what you have gained by your disgraceful conduct."

"Yes. Tell me your name——" cried Melanie, but her lover's smile spoke sooner than his lips.

"I am Otto von Ilsenberg," said he.

"And if you had not left home——" said the baron.

"But can you forgive the things I've said?" cried Melanie.

"Will you forgive me the letters?" said Otto.

"This garden is damp and I'm rheumatic," said the baron. "Let us go back to Bertholdsruhe."

MY NOBLE PRESERVER

It would never have happened if Dick Lulworth had not been so stupidly determined to efface himself and make room for Sir Sydney Minchin. I invited Dick to come into my boat, and he pretended not to hear, and followed Miss Swainson into hers. Miss Swainson is forty-five and saucy, so I was not jealous of her: but I was put out. Who was Dick to behave as if he knew my mind better than I knew it myself? I have no objection to men calling themselves the lords of creation, and our lords by the way. They have stronger muscles, and they build the bridges and fight the battles and make most of the money; so I daresay it's all right. We do as we choose when it matters, and they do as we choose too, and what's in a name? Most of them are very good-natured and amenable. But even the best of them are extraordinarily thick-headed sometimes. I don't mean exactly thick-witted, and I don't mean pig-headed, but a combination of the two. Any woman who has to deal with men will know what I mean, and what kind of man Dick was. You like it, but you tear your hair. Dick is rather good at building bridges, and is believed to have a career and an income before him.

He is, however, a poor man compared with Sir Sydney Minchin, whose father made a million and a baronetcy out of cattle food and left both to his son.

Of course, I knew that Dick loved me. He had never told me so, but Dick can no more hide his feelings than a mirror can hide what you hold up to it. I had not hidden mine either, but I was not going to invite Dick in plain English to marry me. Prerogative and duty go together, and if men stand on their rights they must play their part. Dick however had made up his mind that I ought to marry Sir Sydney Minchin. My own wishes did not seem to weigh with him, and that was what provoked me.

The occasion was my birthday, and we were celebrating it by a picnic. We always have our picnics in Polvissey Bay, and after lunch we go around the point in little boats and look at the caves. I was rather surprised to find Sir Sydney Minchin could manage a boat, because my Uncle Joseph (the uncle I don't like) had spoken of him as a young man of noble principles and exemplary application. No one would describe Dick so, and yet Dick's principles are all right, and I am sure it takes more application to build bridges than to write stodgy articles for the monthly reviews, which is all that Sir Sydney Minchin has done since he gave up globe-trotting. Some time ago he had brought me his articles collected and printed for private circulation. They were bound in drab, and when we were in the boat together the volume was still uncut. I had looked at the headings, and when I saw they were all about Urban Rates and the Sewage Question and Bi-metallism, I read "Geraint and Enid" instead. Dick reminds me of

Geraint, but I have nothing in common with Enid. I admire meek women in poetry, but in actual life a woman has just as much need of a backbone as a man. Otherwise when she is young her love affairs go wrong, and when she is old she is ridiculous.

"The ideal woman should lean on the ideal man," said Sir Sydney Minchin, to whom I had just communicated this opinion. It was he who had started the conversation, and led it into these deep waters.

"It makes a pretty picture," I admitted.

Sir Sydney Minchin was slim and weedy. He had a small amiable face, and eyes without any laugh in them. He was capable of talking about urban rates when he was looking at waves and clouds, and as the sun lit up the highest hill in the district he told me in how many minutes he had lately got to the top and down again.

"I believe I should have beaten the record," he said, "but, unfortunately, I stopped to look at the view."

"You must wear blinkers next time," I told him, "then you'll be out of temptation."

He smiled indulgently, and said the idea was unpractical because blinkers were made to fit horses and not human beings. What an awful thing it would be to pass your life with a man who answered you like that! As he spoke, Dick's boat came alongside ours.

"Bet you a box of chocolates I'm at the caves first," he called out to me.

"Done," said I. "Buck up, Sir Sydney."

I am distinctly not a slangy girl, and written down it looks horrid, I know. But Sir Sydney Minchin is

the kind of man who seems to fetch slang out of you, even if as a rule it isn't there. He looked as solemn as a donkey and said:

"I never bet, Miss Fitzgerald. I must ask you to excuse me."

"I'll excuse you from eating the chocolates, but I want to win them," I said. "Shall I take the oars?"

He seemed rather offended and began to row faster, but he made no way against Dick. Besides, directly he put on speed he began to row badly. His oars were all over the place, and he caught crabs and bucketed dreadfully, and I wished I was not in this cockleshell of a boat with him amongst the rocks of Polvissey Bay.

"Never mind the chocolates," I said; "go slower, you have to feel your way a bit here."

"Mr Lulworth isn't feeling his way much," he said, craning his head round to watch Dick. As he did so the stroke oar hit sharply against a rock and flew out of his hand. He stood up in a flurry and reached after it; the boat upset, and there we both were floundering in the water. The rest of the party stood on the shore looking at us, and no doubt feeling like that amiable Roman who said it made him extra comfortable to see other people in distress. I had on a new muslin frock.

I thought I had better scramble on to a rock and sit there like a mermaid till help came, and I should have managed that in spite of my long, clinging clothes if it had not been for Sir Sydney Minchin. I was trying to keep my head above water, because I had a new hat on, when he came up puffing and

wheezing, and made a clutch at my head and ducked it right under. At first I thought he had gone mad and wanted to drown me; but before I could speak he said:

"Don't cling to me . . . you'll drown us both if you cling to me. I'll save your life."

"I wish you'd leave me alone," I said savagely. "You'll ruin my hat."

I am not much of a swimmer, and I was quite out of breath with the sudden upset into the water and the sudden ducking beneath it.. Of course my clothes hampered me, and so did Sir Sydney. He would not let me go until we were in three feet of water, and then he said anxiously that he thought we were safe now. I was too cross to speak. Imagine what I looked like wading through the waves towards all those *dry* people! And there was Uncle Joseph waiting to receive us with tears in his eyes and beautiful sentiments on his lips.

"What courage!" he bleated. "What presence of mind! When I saw him clutch your hair I could have wept."

"So could I," I said. "Look at my hat."

I ran as hard as I could to the nearest fisherman's cottage, and borrowed some dry garments and sat at tea in them instead of in the blue muslin.

"I observe that having your life saved upsets your temper," whispered Dick as he passed by.

But the worst was to come at dinner that night, when, because it was my birthday, Uncle Joseph, who is my guardian, got up and proposed my health. If Sir Sydney had snatched me out of the flames he could not have spoken of the young man in terms

of greater eulogy, or made more of my obligation to him. He coupled our names together for ten minutes by the clock, and said his dear and beautiful niece (ME) merited any fate, however brilliant, and he hoped I should be enjoying one worthy of me before my next birthday. Then he mumbled something about the brave deserving the fair, and sat down amidst general applause. Of course, my friends and relations thought that he was making sly and admissible allusions to my union with Sir Sydney Minchin. Uncle Joseph is the successful member of the family, and everyone says he will soon be offered a peerage. I have always considered him an owl.

As if I had not had enough, Sir Sydney Minchin got up next and said he would like to thank Mr Leatherhead for his graceful speech. Sir Sydney has a thin reedy voice and a discursive tongue. He brought in all his favourite subjects, including Urban Rates, and somehow managed to entangle my name with them. He said he was not in any way proud of what he had done this afternoon, and he hoped we should meet again next year under slightly different circumstances.

"Will you echo my wish?" he said to me as he sat down.

"Indeed I will," I said. "This year I'm getting a cold in the head."

"I shall probably be in Burma next year," said Dick.

In the drawing-room after dinner all the women looked at me as women do look at a girl whose engagement they expect to come off under their very eyes. They did not exactly talk about Sir Sydney Minchin,

but they talked of their sensations when they saw me in the water and their relief when he towed me out. Mother was away in a corner with old Lady Brandon, and the women near me took Uncle Joseph seriously, and thought I had had a narrow escape. I got so cross that finally I went into the conservatory to look at the Night-Blowing Sirius. It would have soothed me if Dick had appeared; but when I heard a step it was not Dick's, and when I looked round I saw Sir Sydney Minchin. He seemed rather less dead-alive than usual.

"How I envy you!" he began at once. "What an inestimable blessing to be nearly connected with that great, that celebrated man whose monumental knowledge is only equalled by the sagacity of his judgments and the affable condescension of his manners!"

Sir Sydney talks as he writes, so you can fancy what his articles are like.

"Do you mean Uncle Joseph?" I said.

"Whom else could I mean? Oh! Miss Fitzgerald! if I might hope . . . if I might aspire . . . is there any chance do you think that at some future date I too might be allowed to address him as Uncle Joseph?"

"I should ask him if I were you," I said.

"I will," he replied with a degree of rapture that made me tired. He lifted my hand to his lips before I could stop him and rushed out of the conservatory. As he disappeared Dick came in from the garden, where I suppose he had been smoking. He looked suspiciously at Sir Sydney's vanishing coat-tails, and suspiciously at me.

"Your noble preserver is in a hurry," he said, and sat down.

"I believe the water has got into his brain. He has run off to ask my guardian if at some future date he may address him as . . . Uncle Joseph."

"H—m!" said Dick. He seemed out of humour. So was I. We both stared at the Night-Blowing Sirius.

In a few minutes Sir Sydney returned, his face twitching with nervousness and self-satisfaction. This didn't make him any handsomer.

"I have seen your guardian," he said. "I have his consent . . . his approving consent. He is on his way here now. He says that when he saw us in the water together, he pointed out to your mother that the episode had only one legitimate conclusion. He actually implies, such is his amiable sense of humour, that I upset the boat on purpose."

Dick got up, and as he did so Uncle Joseph with my mother appeared in the conservatory. My mother looked vexed and bewildered. She adores Dick.

"My dear niece," began Uncle Joseph, "I am delighted, but not surprised. After this young gentleman's heroism to-day you could give him no other reply; and if solid worth and great wealth make for happiness, why then . . ."

I stared at Sir Sydney Minchin, and I stared at Uncle Joseph.

"I wish you'd speak plain English," I said.

"Sir Sydney thinks you have promised to marry him," said my mother.

I turned on Sir Sydney.

"You never asked me to marry you," I cried.

" You asked if you might call Mr Leatherhead Uncle Joseph."

" It was my way of putting it," said Sir Sydney.

" Remember what you owe him," said Uncle Joseph.

I glanced at mother, and I glanced at Dick. On both their faces I saw a carefully reined-in smile. As long as they understood what had really happened I could afford to be generous. Sir Sydney and the pompous old politician would console each other.

" I know it seems very ungrateful . . ." I began meekly. Mother looked quite relieved. She lingered behind Uncle Joseph and Sir Sydney when, a few minutes later, they departed arm in arm, both solemn and sorrowful, and full of surprise at my stupidity.

" My dear child," said mother, " I saw that idiot upset the boat. I saw him drag your new hat under the water, and prevent you waiting comfortably on a rock for some one to fetch you. It is very decent of you to have held your tongue just now."

" Just what I think," said Dick.

Mother looked at us uncertainly and disappeared. Dick sat down again.

" I ought to go and sing to Uncle Joseph," I said. " He likes a little music after dinner."

" Wait a minute," said Dick. " I want to ask you a question . . . the same question, in fact, that Sir Sydney asked just now. Maud, if I do, what answer will you give me ? "

I raised my eyes to his, and thought how pleasant life would be with Dick's eyes opposite mine every day.

"Dear Dick," I said, "if you do ask the same question, and if it is really your heart's desire . . ."

"It is," said Dick, and put both his arms round me. He is so impetuous.

"Very well," I said. "Then at some future date, Dick, if you want your answer—and you seem in a hurry—at some future date, with my consent, you shall be allowed to call Mr Leatherhead Uncle Joseph."

"You give me my heart's desire," said Dick.

MISS LIVERSEDGE AND THE V.C.

THE Beauchamps lived in a delightful old house in Kensington Square, and on the last Christmas Day of the nineteenth century they were giving a family dinner-party. Violet Beauchamp had dressed early, and was sitting by the drawing-room fire. She was an only daughter, and a very pretty girl, and about a week ago she had engaged herself to Nevil Middleton, a young barrister who was beginning to get on. It was for his step on the stairs that she listened whenever there was a sound, and some time before anyone else was likely to arrive she heard it. No one knew of the engagement, because Violet had said she did not wish to make it public yet, or even to tell Nevil's parents and her own.

"I can't understand why," Nevil had said. "I know my father will be pleased, and I hope yours will. I hate unnecessary secrets!"

"Very well," Violet had said at once, "then we won't be engaged."

Of course the young man gave in. What else could he do? But when he reached the house on Christmas Day he had made up his mind to re-open

the question. He carried some Neapolitan violets and a small parcel, and he put both into Violet's hands as she came to meet him. A look of trouble and perplexity clouding her charming face was driven from it for a moment, and she gave him a welcome that encouraged him to speak.

"The violets are for the world," he said, "and I hope the other . . ."

She took the wrapping from the parcel, and found a little jeweller's case, and in the case a diamond ring.

"Oh!" she cried; and it seemed to Nevil that she wanted to cast it from her.

"You will please me if you wear it," he said.

"Not yet."

"To-night?"

The cloud came over her face again. She had not even taken the ring from its case; and now her hand closed over it as they both heard Mrs Beauchamp's voice outside. A moment later the mistress of the house came into the room. She liked Nevil Middleton, so she wished him a Merry Christmas very cordially, and admired the violets that her girl still held in her hand. Mr Beauchamp had followed his wife almost immediately; then Violet's young brother Denis appeared, and then a large contingent of uncles and cousins. Amidst the slight confusion of arrival and greeting Nevil saw Violet go up to a Chippendale cabinet on which there stood a small carved cedar-wood box and a Venetian glass. She put the flowers in the glass and the ring in the box. Then she asked her brother to fetch some water for the flowers.

The little boy went out of the room, and soon came running back in a state of great excitement.

" He's come ! " he cried, splashing the water over Violet's hands ; " I heard his voice in the hall."

" Who has come, Denis ? " asked Nevil.

" Cousin Bob . . . the V.C.," said the boy.

Nevil saw that Violet's face was tense with expectation, and that her hand shook as she filled the glass and put back the flowers. He saw everyone crowd round a big moon-faced young man and an elderly lady who had just come into the room, and he heard a chorus of welcome and congratulation go up to them. He and Violet were left by themselves for the moment.

" So your cousin is a V.C. ? " he said.

" We only knew of it yesterday," said Violet.

" What did he do ? "

" Rescued someone under heavy fire . . . got wounded . . . I don't know . . . I forget."

She spoke distractedly, and clung with one hand to a *portière*, looking, Nevil thought, as if she would like to hide behind it. The moon-faced young man came straight towards her.

" You see I've done it, Vi," he said as he shook hands. " I told you I would if it was worth while."

" Mr Middleton . . . Captain Clare," said Violet, presenting the young men to each other. " Tell Mr Middleton what you have done, Bob. I forget."

" Oh, I say," cried Bob. " Never mind what I did as long as you remember why I did it."

Nevil could not doubt that the young man's words held some allusion that Violet understood and found painful. The wonder was that Bob seemed blind to the girl's distress. His plain, unintelligent face beamed at her complacently.

" I wasn't long about it either, was I ? " he went on.

"You gave me a year, but it isn't a year by a long chalk. I say, I've brought you a Christmas present. Shall I give it you now or afterwards?"

"Afterwards," said Violet. "Go and talk to Miss Liversedge. You are to take her down to dinner."

"I'd counted on you," said Bob ruefully.

"Why should he have counted on you?" asked Nevil, as Violet and he went downstairs arm-in-arm.

The girl murmured something he could not hear, and then they were with others in the dining-room. Nevil found himself seated between Violet and Miss Liversedge, a middle-aged lady with pronounced views. While her neighbours ate their dinner she ate nuts, and told Bob, whom she had known all his life, what she thought of wars and soldiers. She said the real hero was the man who refused to fight; and from all she had lately heard of Bob she thought he must be a shocking coward. Bob owned that he sometimes felt like running away.

"When?" asked Miss Liversedge.

"Oh!" said Bob, trying to get a glimpse of Violet, first by leaning forward and then by leaning back, "when I can't defend myself, don't you know."

"Then if you were not a coward you would do it," said Miss Liversedge; "and if you are going to fidget like that I wish you would."

The plain-spoken lady then turned her attention to Nevil. She thought small beer of lawyers as well as of soldiers, and it never occurred to her that her opinions were neither interesting nor important to anyone but herself. She made a discordant note in an agreeable company, but Mr Beauchamp always asked her at Christmas because he thought he ought. His

sense of duty, however, stopped at the invitation. He would not have her next to him. It was Mrs Beauchamp who had thought to make her happy by sending her down with the family hero. She knew that Miss Liversedge trampled on heroes, but she had put her pretty niece Maud on Bob's other side. Bob soon found this out, and of the four people with which this history is concerned, he was the one who enjoyed himself. Whenever Nevil turned to Violet she was talking to an amiable but deaf and ignorant old judge, who wanted everything repeated three times and had never heard of Sherlock Holmes.

"I hate speeches . . . when other people make them," said Miss Liversedge, at the end of the feast, as her host rose to address his guests.

But it was a short speech, and it interested Nevil, because it told him why Captain Clare was to receive the Victoria Cross.

"I think he deserved it," he said to Miss Liversedge.

"I expected Mr Beauchamp to announce the engagement," said Miss Liversedge. "His mother told me all about it this morning."

"Mr Beauchamp's mother?"

"Mr Beauchamp hasn't got a mother," said Miss Liversedge; and as she viciously cracked a walnut she said to it, "I hate a fool!"

Unfortunately Bob, who had just risen to return thanks, thought that Miss Liversedge alluded to him.

"I say . . ." he exclaimed, and everyone at the table laughed because it was such an odd way to begin a speech. He looked round the table for encouragement, and on most of the friendly faces present he found it. Only his cantankerous neighbour went on

cracking nuts, and Violet, whose profile he could see, now looked white and wretched. The nuts worried Bob dreadfully, but he floundered along as best he could, expressing his thanks and his delight at being at home again, and his surprise at his undeserved good luck! When he came to this last sentiment Miss Liversedge said "Hear, hear!" so audibly that people either looked at their plates or at Bob's mother to see if she was angry. Luckily, Mrs Clare was as good-humoured as her son, and she knew Miss Liversedge.

"I wish I could tell Bob to stop," she said to her host. "He has said all he need. What is he fumbling in his pocket for? What is that in his hand?"

Poor Bob had got into such a tangle, and was so much disconcerted by Miss Liversedge's jeering applause, that he did not know what he was doing. He had spoken with one hand fidgeting in his pocket; and now in the middle of a sentence he drew it out, and stared in a puzzled way at a small morocco case that came with it.

"Is that for Violet?" said Miss Liversedge in a stage whisper.

"Yes," said Bob, quite distraught.

"Then say so. We can all see what it is."

"I don't like to do that."

"I knew you were a coward," said Miss Liversedge; and she stood up as Bob hurriedly sat down.

She liked public speaking, and she spoke well. After Bob's parentheses and broken phrases it was a relief to hear her. She told her astonished audience that before Captain Clare went to South Africa Violet had promised to marry him if he got the Victoria Cross; and incidentally she opened the little morocco

case, and displayed a diamond ring. She ended by saying that of course it was not her business to make this announcement, but she had nursed Bob as a baby, and knew he would never have the pluck to speak for himself.

"Is this true?" said Nevil in an undertone to Violet, while everyone at the table talked at once.

At first Violet could not speak. Nevil's stern face and voice frightened her. Then, as the ladies rose to go, she whispered to him.

"Come to the morning-room," she said; "I'll wait for you there."

Bob had turned right round to watch her pass, but she seemed not to see him, and she manœuvred to escape all the aunts and cousins waiting outside and on the stairs for her. She went straight to the empty morning-room, turned on the light, and listened in suspense for Nevil. He soon came.

"Which of us have you fooled?" he said, after a painful pause.

Violet felt quite stunned and broken by his anger, but in any great perplexity it was natural to her to see what the plain truth would do to solve it. The ruses and evasions that some women use, and that men think all women use, never offered themselves to her.

"I love you, Nevil," she said, speaking with downcast eyes, and trying to make no appeal to his pity; "I have never loved Bob. But before he went out—before I knew you—he proposed to me over and over again . . . and at last . . . when he bid good-bye . . . I said I would if he got the V.C."

"Why didn't you tell me this when I proposed to you?"

"Because I never dreamed . . . I thought it was like telling Bob to bring me the moon. Perhaps I was a little afraid, too. . . ."

The young man turned away, for he could not look at Violet and behave as hardly as his anger urged him to just then.

"Of course you must keep your word," he said; and he went out of the room, although she gave a little cry of trouble and recall that ought to have stopped him.

He had some idea of leaving the house at once, but as he reached the hall the men came from the dining-room, and his host led him affectionately upstairs.

When he got into the drawing-room he thought of the ring concealed in the little Indian box, and he made up his mind to take it away with him. He wondered what Bob had done with his ring, and whether he would find an opportunity that evening of putting it on Violet's hand. At present Miss Liversedge sat close to the Chippendale cabinet, and Nevil could not have opened the box on it without attracting her officious attention. But he sat down near, and bided his time. Bob came to that part of the room too, and talked to the pretty girl who had been beside him at dinner. Presently Violet appeared, and she, seeing Miss Liversedge languishing alone, came up to her.

"Where have you been hiding?" said the tactful lady. "You look as if you had seen a ghost. We were all effervescing with good wishes a quarter of an hour ago. But I feel flat by this time."

Violet tried to catch Nevil's eye, and failed. He was button-holed by the judge, and had neither eyes

nor ears for her it seemed. Bob moved a little, so that his chair was midway between Violet and her cousin. He felt alarmed by Violet to-night; she looked so pale and behaved so coldly; yet he thought he ought to pay her some attention.

"I'm going out to India soon," he began. "We're ordered there."

"Are you?" said Violet. The idea evidently did not trouble her. She spoke as if it hardly reached her understanding.

"I should love to go to India," said Maud.

"Should you like it, Violet?" said Bob.

"Not for more than six months."

"We may be there for years."

"How rippin'!" said Maud. Bob thought she was a delightful girl, as pretty as Violet now that she had put her hair up, and not so unapproachable.

"This is Indian carving," said Miss Liversedge, taking the little carved box from the cabinet.

Violet started, and looked at Nevil again. He saw the box in the lady's hands and left off talking to the judge.

"It is beautiful carving," said Miss Liversedge.

Nevil took a step forward. Violet offered to take the box, as if she wished to examine it. But Miss Liversedge did not give it up. She lifted the lid instead.

"Bless me," she exclaimed, "here's your ring, Violet! How did it get in here, and why isn't it on your finger?"

She took out the little case and handed it to Violet. The girl looked at Nevil and found neither hope nor encouragement in his face. His hardness had at first

dismayed her; now it gave her spirit. She opened the case, and put the ring on the third finger of her left hand, where it sparkled gaily. Meanwhile Bob had dug his ring out of his pocket again. He looked as much taken aback as the little boy who sees a rabbit coaxed out of his mouth by a conjuror.

"I say," he cried, "that isn't my ring! Here's mine! That's a marquise! I don't like 'em!"

Miss Liversedge glanced from one young man to the other. Nevil's face told her all she wanted to know.

"Which is your engagement ring?" she said to Violet.

"This is," said Violet.

"But it isn't mine," objected Bob.

"It is mine," said Nevil, holding out his hand for it. "I am here to take it back."

Bob looked at Violet, and saw that she was as white as the snowdrops in her hair. He looked at Nevil, and saw that he was hard hit too. For a moment he paused, but only for a moment.

"I don't believe she wants to give it back," he said bluntly to Nevil. "Do you, Vi?"

"No, I don't, dear old Bob," said Violet, her heart going out to the moon-faced young man as it never had before.

"See here," said Bob to Miss Liversedge, "you come and make another speech. It's all your doing and the mater's . . . being in such a hurry to manage my affairs . . . and a nice mess you've made of 'em. I told you both I wasn't more than half sure of Vi."

"I don't mind making another speech," said Miss Liversedge; "I like a lively evening. But is Violet

engaged to anyone? I ought to know for certain before I announce it again."

"I have been engaged to Mr Middleton for more than a week," said Violet. "But I did not want anyone to know till I had seen Bob and talked to him. I hoped he would let me off."

"Rather," said Bob; "at least, I don't mean that. You know what I mean, Vi."

"What will become of your ring?" asked Miss Liversedge.

"It will follow me to India one of these days," said Bob. He took it out of the case and showed it to Maud.

"Do you like it as well as Violet's?" he said.

"Let us get away if there is to be another sensation," said Nevil to Violet. "I hate sensations; don't you?"

"I can't hate this one," said Violet. "But we will come away for a little while if you wish. I want you to tell me whether I may keep your ring."

POOR CHARLES

MRS FLATHER was annoyed, and when that happened her family heard of it.

" I really couldn't help it, my dear," said her husband for the fifth time as he surveyed the Christmas dinner-table. " He almost invited himself."

" He might have quite invited himself if he had had me to deal with," said Mrs Flather. " But he would not have come."

" You have so much *aplomb*," said Mr Flather, altering the position of one cracker and upsetting a dozen. " But poor Charles used to be my favourite cousin, and when we were boys . . ."

" I'm too busy now to listen to your reminiscences, and if you want to pull the table to pieces you had better ring for Gibson. Whatever Charles may have been as a boy, he's a ne'er-do-weel as a man, and I've no room in my house for ne'er-do-weels."

Mr Flather had married a widow with money, and the house really was her house. She did not allow her husband or anyone else to forget it.

" But none of us know what Charles has been doing for the last fifteen years," urged Mr Flather. " He has never been home or even written."

"That shows he is a ne'er-do-weel. When a man prospers he lets his relatives know of it, especially if he dislikes them. Kate has always given me to understand that the less said about Charles the better."

"Where is he to sit?" asked Mr Flather, who thought the less said about Kate the better.

"I've squeezed him in there, between Meg and one of the children," said Mrs Flather, pointing to a small supplementary table set in a distant corner of the room.

"But, my dear . . . with the children . . . Charles is nearly my own age . . . at least, he used to be."

"That is where he will sit," said Mrs Flather.

"I should have put him near Beatrice."

"Luckily you have nothing to do with it. Beatrice is near Mr Pretoria."

Mr Flather turned off the lights and followed his wife out of the room. Privately he thought that if he was a girl he would prefer Charles to Mr Pretoria. For though Mr Flather was docile, he had his own opinions, and they often consoled him when in the eyes of the world he was cutting a poor figure.

As he crossed the hall he met a very pretty girl dressed for dinner in a frock that had obviously belonged to someone else when it was fresher and more fashionable.

"You're ready early, Meg," he said.

"Yes, uncle," said the girl with a quaver in her voice that led him to look at her more closely.

"Tears on Christmas Day! What have you been doing?"

"Beatrice's hair."

The man sighed, and the girl ran into the drawing-

room. One end of it led into a conservatory that was lighted to-night but not warmed. Two or three deck-chairs stood about amongst a scanty show of palms and indiarubber plants. Meg shivered as she looked inside.

"When Mr Trevone comes take him in there and keep him out of sight as much as possible," her aunt had said to her. "The less he mixes with us the better."

Meg was Mr Flather's niece. She was penniless, and her lot at present was not a happy one. She felt that these instructions were meant just as much for her as for this poor cousin who was so unwelcome; and when the butler announced Mr Charles Trevone she went forward with a friendly little smile to meet someone rather scrubby and humble—like herself. But the man who came in was not scrubby. *He* was not wearing someone else's cast-off clothes, thought Meg. He was not anything that she expected; not even elderly. His composure and his keen glance flurried her.

"I am Meg Arden," she said.

"I knew that at once," said he.

Meg did not ask why. She led him to the fire in the back drawing-room, for she thought they might as well keep warm as long as they could.

"I came on purpose to see you," he said. "Your uncle told me you were here, and that you had grown up the image of your mother. So I said I would dine with him to-day."

He looked about the room, and did not seem overcome by its splendours. His glance soon returned to Meg.

"Is anyone else coming?" he asked.

"Fourteen are coming," said Meg. "The whole family and Mr Pretoria."

"Oh! Pretoria," said this astonishing Charles, and he crossed one leg over another and looked contemplatively at Meg again. Presently Mrs Flather came into the room and shook hands with him in a cursory way while she gave an order to a servant. She did not present him to anybody who arrived. When the room began to fill Meg got up.

"Shall we go into the conservatory?" she said timidly.

Charles looked at the open doors and the gloomy interior beyond.

"Why should we?" he asked; and Meg was not quick to reply. She did not want either to give her aunt away or to defy her commands.

"Have you been told to go?" said Charles, getting up; and again she did not know what to say. She asked him how they kept Christmas in Canada. From where they sat they could see the warm, well-lighted room and the lively company; but Meg shivered.

"Do you propose to sit here again after dinner?" said Charles, and for the third time Meg did not answer.

"There is Beatrice, uncle's stepdaughter," she said, pointing out a plain, sallow-looking girl dressed in bright red. "Uncle gave her those pearls for a Christmas present."

"What did he give you?"

"Five shillings," said Meg unwillingly.

Then they saw that people were going down to dinner, and they followed in the rear. Meg led her companion to the small side-table, and showed him a

seat that placed him with his back to all the grown-up guests. Three well-behaved, rather repressed children sat opposite him.

"They remind me of my uncle," said Charles.

The side-table did not get the best of the dinner because the servants were too busy to attend to it properly. It was a very quiet table. The three children hardly spoke, and Charles talked to Meg in undertones. But he talked a good deal, and by the time the turkey came round Meg had answered questions that gave him the picture he wanted, the picture of the life she was leading in Mrs Flather's house. He asked too many questions, she told him at last.

"Very well," he said; "I'll ask one more, and then I'll have done."

But he did not ask it. He laughed a little at her expectant eyes, and offered her one end of a cracker.

"Mother does not like us to touch the crackers before dessert," said one of the children, and Meg looked afraid to take it. So Charles pulled the cracker by himself, and it made a dreadful noise.

"Who did that?" said Mrs Flather, speaking in a voice like thunder and turning her face towards the little table.

"It went off in my hands," said Charles.

"Don't let it happen again," said Mrs Flather.

"Trevone!" sang out Mr Pretoria; "what are you doing over there?"

"Having a merry Christmas," said Charles.

"Do you know Mr Trevone?" said Mrs Flather with surprise.

"Wish I didn't," said Mr Pretoria.

Charles heard him and smiled, but he did not turn his head again. He had opened his cracker, and found a ring in it and a motto in poetry. "Will you be my wife—for the rest of your life?" it said. He put it in his pocket with the ring. The children watched him.

"We have all the toys out of the crackers," said the middle one. "They are of no use to old people."

"If that child doesn't take care she'll grow up like her mother," said Charles in French to Meg.

Meg tried to look severe, but it was not effective. Everything seemed to amuse Charles, even the little episode about the champagne. He asked for some when he was offered lemonade; but he got none. The servant looked awkward, whispered to his mistress, and did not bring it.

"Champagne is very expensive," said the third child. "I heard mother say she would not waste hers on the undeserving poor."

A fusillade of crackers at the big table drowned both Meg's reproof and Charles's cheerful haw-haw.

"I expect to find you in the conservatory," he whispered to Meg as she followed the ladies upstairs.

Meg stole away there as soon as she could. Some of the ladies were talking about their presents and their gaieties; some of them were talking about Charles Trevone. They had not recognised him; they had not known he was in England again. They wondered what he had been doing for fifteen years.

"Nothing," said a thin-lipped woman the others called Aunt Kate. "He did no good in my husband's office. Then he emigrated. He has probably been driving cabs. You heard what Mr Pretoria said."

Mrs Flather murmured something about Mr Flather's poor relations and the way they vexed her soul. She knew she could confess her soul to Kate and find sympathy. They were as friendly as financiers. It was at this juncture that Meg slipped away. The lamp in the conservatory had gone out. She sat by herself in the dark for a long time. She heard the gentlemen return to the drawing-room, and still Charles Trevone did not come to her. Perhaps he had forgotten; perhaps someone had hindered him. She began to feel bitterly cold, and with the cold her short-spun happiness seemed to ebb away. There were tears in her eyes when she got up to open the locked garden door because someone outside was impatiently rattling the handle. She expected to see a child, but it was Charles Trevone who came in. He wore a long fur-lined coat, and he carried another that he straightway put on Meg's shoulders. It had a sable collar and silver clasps, and lace at the throat and sleeves. The warmth of it made Meg want to purr.

"Did you find it in the hall?" she said. "We must put it back at once. It probably belongs to Aunt Kate."

"It belongs to you," said Charles. "I got it at that corner shop in the Mayfair Road," he went on, seeing Meg look incredulous and rather scared. "The proprietor was having his Christmas dinner, but when I told him what I wanted he was quite willing to do business. Now we'll sit down and be happy, and you will answer my question."

"But I thought you were poor," said Meg.

"Is that why you were so nice to me?"

"Yes; I felt sorry for you."

"Who told you I was poor?"

"Mrs Flather and Aunt Kate. They believe it."

"Bless them!" said Charles; and then he asked his question. Perhaps the motto out of the cracker put it into his head. While Meg was trying to answer it the lights in the drawing-room went out quite suddenly.

"What clumsy garments these fur-lined coats are!" said Charles.

"They are going to play snap-dragon," said Meg. "I think we ought to go in."

"My wife for the rest of your life," said Charles, holding her back a moment. He thought no one could see them. But, unfortunately, Mr Flather opened the door just as Mrs Flather set a match to the snap-dragon, and the blue flames fell like lime-light on the two people in fur coats. It was an uncomfortable moment for Meg. Charles did not seem to mind much.

"Meg and I are going to be married; next week if I have my own way," he said to his uncle. Everyone overheard him.

"What is he going to marry on?" said Aunt Kate to Mrs Flather. Everyone overheard that too. Mr Pretoria showed that he was amused.

"Look at him fishing out all the figs and dates," he said to Beatrice. "I only got a raisin, and then I burnt my fingers."

To the amazement of everyone, the rich man linked his arm affectionately in the poor man's arm, and drew him away from the flaming bowl. Mrs Flather could take no further interest in snap-dragon.

She commanded Mr Flather to turn on the lights. The company then saw Mr Pretoria sitting with Charles Trevone and Meg at the further end of the room. They were laughing.

"He won't tell me what he is going to marry on," complained Mr Pretoria; but he obeyed the summons in Mrs Flather's eye and got up from the sofa.

"I thought you objected to Mr Trevone," she said, taking him aside. He stared, and then he remembered what he had said at dinner.

"We had a deal the other day and I got the worst of it," he explained. "Dives fleeced poor Lazarus."

"Dives . . . Lazarus!" gasped Mrs Flather.

"I'm Lazarus," said Mr Pretoria, "compared with Trevone."

Mrs Flather never forgave her husband. She said he had misled her. Charles forgave her in an airy way, but he carried Meg out of the house as soon as he could. Not in a week, however.

"Dear Charles must wait till your clothes are ready," said Mrs Flather. "You can't go to a millionaire in rags."

THE GIRL HE LEFT BEHIND HIM

THERE could no longer be any reasonable doubt. Poor Jack Lester had been drowned in the wreck of the *Ootacamund*, and Celia Grey was the most unhappy girl in Woodbury. She was forced to keep her grief to herself because she had not been officially engaged to Jack. She thought it might have been a little easier to bear if her friends had known how unhappy she was, and with what good reason. With this great secret sorrow in her heart the ordinary routine of life grew painful. She had no spirit for tennis parties; she hated her gay summer frocks; she even wished she need not act as bridesmaid to her cousin Susie. She used to lie awake at night and think about Jack, and wonder how much he had minded being drowned.

However, Celia went to her cousin's wedding, and spent three days away from Woodbury. The news of the wreck was a fortnight old, and forgotten by most people, when she came back again. She arrived by a morning train, sent her trunk to Beechdene House with a porter, and walked home through Woodbury High Street, where she wished to do some

shopping. As she went into the stationer's she saw Fanny Potter there, a girl she knew slightly and disliked. If it had been possible she would have escaped from the shop rather than speak to Fanny, but she was recognised at once.

"Good morning, Celia," said Miss Potter, putting down a packet of black-edged envelopes and coming forward. For a short time some years ago the two girls had been in the same class at the High School, and on the strength of this Fanny continued to address Celia by her Christian name. She did not often get the chance of doing so. The Potters were not people with whom the Greys wished to be on friendly terms. Mr Potter was an attorney of doubtful reputation. It was well known that on Fanny's behalf he had threatened a well-to-do farmer with a breach-of-promise case, and that the young man had only got off by paying a substantial sum. Since that time Fanny had dressed more fashionably than ever, but she had not been asked for her hand and heart again.

Celia bought what she wanted, and was about to leave the shop when Fanny followed her and said that they might as well walk a little way together. She was going past Beechdene.

Celia had no excuse on the tip of her tongue, so she did as she was asked, although she rather objected to be seen in Miss Potter's society. The two young women walked through the town together, and were soon in a quiet country road. It was a very hot morning.

"You must find that gown rather heavy," said Celia, who saw that her companion wore mourning deep enough for a young widow.

"My heart is very heavy," said Fanny, with an accentuated sigh.

Celia reflected. She had not heard of Mr Potter's demise; and Mrs Potter she had seen at the station dressed in bright blue.

"I did not know you were in trouble," she said civilly.

It was rather difficult to be more than civil, because Fanny showed her grief in such an objectionable way. She had pulled out a pocket-handkerchief with a broad black border, and was sobbing into it so loudly that anyone they passed stared after them.

"Didn't you know?" howled Fanny.

"No," said Celia. "What is the matter?"

"I thought everyone knew. I am staying with the Lesters. That is why I have to pass Beechdene."

Celia felt as if her heart stopped for a moment, and then went on again in a greater hurry than was comfortable. She laughed rather nervously, and said:

"I don't know what you mean. You are not in mourning because you are staying with the Lesters, I suppose?"

"What a heartless girl you must be to make fun of us when we are in such trouble!" sobbed Fanny. She paused while a wave of extra strong emotion shook her breast; and then she added in a sepulchral tone, "Poor Jack Lester is drowned!"

"I know that," said Celia sharply; "but I don't see yet why you should be in mourning."

"Jack and I were engaged."

Celia turned ashen white. Otherwise she made no sign. She walked ahead doggedly, and kept her open sunshade between her companion and herself.

"He gave me this ring," continued Fanny, pulling off her glove. "Look at it! 'From Jack to Fanny' is engraved inside. Poor dear Jack!"

Celia raised her sunshade a little and glanced at the ring. She thought it rather vulgar, and quite suitable for Miss Potter. It consisted of a large emerald surrounded by coarsely cut diamonds. She thought it did not look Jack's choice.

"How long——?" she began; and then to her vexation she could not go on. Her heart beat too much.

"How long were we engaged? Oh! only just before he sailed. No one knew of it; but when I heard that he was drowned I wrote to his father and mother. I felt sure they would be glad, poor old things. I am staying with them now."

"Really!" said Celia; and then, having arrived at the gate of Beechdene, she rather abruptly bid good-bye.

From her mother Celia learned that the impossible story was true. Woodbury rang with the news. The Lesters were respected people; the Potters were not. No one could understand why Jack Lester should have made such a trumpery choice, or how Fanny with her blowsy beauty had managed to captivate him. Without the ring she would hardly have persuaded anyone that she told the truth. Directly the confirmation of his death arrived she had put herself into mourning and drawn down the parlour blinds, while Mr and Mrs Potter, with an air of great surprise, spread the report of her bereavement. They had not known of any engagement, they said, until poor dear Fanny swooned at the news of the wreck, and afterwards exhibited her ring.

She nearly swooned again when Colonel Lester called. She said he reminded her so strongly of her beloved Jack.

Colonel Lester and his wife were elderly people, who led a secluded life in their beautiful old home. They saw little of the world outside the Langholme gates. When Fanny's letter reached them they had to make inquiries about her, and the answers they got were unpleasing. But in the first stress of their great sorrow they would have welcomed the Woodbury sweep at Langholme if he could have proved that their only son had given him an invitation. As it was, they prepared the west bedroom for Fanny Potter and asked her to spend a fortnight with them.

Woodbury looked on astonished. Mr and Mrs Potter held up their heads, and talked about the dear Colonel and his wonderful affection for their eldest girl. Celia drooped. Her mother thought of sending her to the sea, she lost colour and weight so fast. The poor child was grievously hurt. She had loved Jack Lester and believed in him. There had been enough of an understanding between them to warrant her hopes. Had he deceived her? And what made her heart ache most—the fable of his treachery or the thought that he was dead?

About a month after the wreck of the *Ootacamund*, Mrs Grey said that she must go and see Mrs Lester one afternoon, and she hoped that Celia would accompany her.

"You go without me," said Celia.

"Mrs Lester is so fond of you," observed Mrs Grey.

"Oh! but she has the Potter girl now," said Celia dejectedly.

Nevertheless, when the afternoon came she went to Langholme with her mother. They were shown into the drawing-room, and found Mrs Lester and her guest at tea. Miss Potter advanced to meet them, and without any loss of time began to show how much she felt at home.

"How d'ye do, Celia!" she cried, and her jet bangles rattled as she wobbled Celia's hand to and fro in the latest "society" manner. "So glad you've come. You'll cheer up the old lady. Fresh tea, Wilkins, and some hot tea-cakes. These are cold. Try this chair, Mrs Grey. The old lady's right ear is not so deaf as her left one."

But neither Mrs Grey nor Celia took very much notice of the young woman. Mrs Lester welcomed her old friends with affection, led them to a distant part of the large room, and gave her own orders to Wilkins. For a little while Miss Fanny felt out of it. She put a word in on several occasions when she had better have remained silent; she moved restlessly about the room, and when the fresh tea came she would have dispensed it if Mrs Lester had not chosen to take possession of the tray herself. It was not until Colonel Lester appeared that Miss Fanny had a chance of reasserting herself. Then she came forward again and made a to-do about his cup of tea. She must pour it out for him. She knew how much sugar he liked. She felt sure that draught at the back of his head could not be good for him. He must really allow her to shut the window. The old man looked worried by these attentions, but he seemed to reckon them well meant. He treated her with exquisite kindness, and Mrs Grey felt sure that he rather than

his wife was responsible for Miss Potter's prolonged stay in the house. Mrs Lester's manner to her guest had not been very cordial.

Colonel Lester looked delighted to see Celia, but he asked her why she had grown so white and thin.

"What can a young girl have to fret about?" he said.

"Oh, Colonel!" sighed Miss Potter reproachfully.

Everyone had finished tea, and Mrs Lester proposed an adjournment to the flower-garden, when they were stopped by Wilkins coming in and asking, with a shaky voice, for his master. The old servant looked scared and upset.

"What is it, Wilkins?" said Miss Potter. "Anything I can do? The Colonel is tired."

Wilkins vouchsafed no reply. He did not even look her way. Colonel Lester got up and went out of the room. Perhaps two minutes passed before he returned. The ladies had begun to talk of something else, when the Colonel opened the door, stood still for a moment on the threshold, looked fixedly at his wife, and then over his shoulder towards the hall. It was just as if Mrs Lester could read something in his face that no one else understood. She got up and walked in a quick, trembling way towards her husband.

"Jack!" she cried. She went with outstretched hands beyond the door, and before anyone quite understood what had happened, Jack rushed forward and took his mother into his arms.

Celia turned so white that her mother thought she would faint; but the next moment she had blushed rosy red because Jack Lester had seized her hand and seemed reluctant to let it go again. No

one noticed the Potter girl steal stealthily towards the low French window that stood open to the lawn.

"What does it mean, Jack?" said his mother at last. "You look very ill."

"I've been pretty bad. I lay in a hut on the Spanish coast for three weeks. I was knocked silly, you know, against the rocks, and then hauled out by some fishermen. The poor chap they took for me must have got hold of my coat with my papers in. It all happened in the dark and in such a hurry. I might have wired from London, but I thought I would just come on. When they put me on board at Cadiz I was not in a condition to act for myself, and the people who looked after me did not know how to get at you."

"We have been taking care of your bride, Jack," said Colonel Lester, who was a good deal surprised by his son's cool manner to her.

Jack looked puzzled, pleased, undetermined.

"My bride!" he said, with a happy light in his eyes. "Celia!"

And he held out both his hands to Miss Grey, at whose side he had remained. But she hung back blushing and embarrassed.

"Jack!" exclaimed his father sternly. "I mean Miss Potter."

"There goes Miss Potter!" said Mrs Grey, pointing to the French window that she could see from her seat. Colonel Lester looked startled, and turned round. They could all see a buxom crape-clad figure speeding down the lawn.

"She said you were engaged," gasped the Colonel. "We believed it."

"You did," said Mrs Lester. "I disliked the girl from the first."

"You never believed it?" said Jack to Celia.

"She wore your ring," stammered Celia.

"That she most certainly did not," said Jack.

"It had 'From Jack to Fanny' inside. I saw the inscription."

"Yes," said the Colonel, "there was no doubt about the inscription."

"I did not give it to her."

"It is very curious," said Mrs Lester. "How did she get the ring?"

"I think I know," said Mrs Grey, who had listened with a meditative face to Jack's denials. "The man who jilted her, the man she threatened with a breach-of-promise case, was called John Smith. He is in Australia now, and the whole business happened out of Woodbury, so I suppose she thought it quite safe to use his ring."

"None of us could understand your taste, Jack," said Mrs Lester.

"You do now, though," said Jack, taking Celia's hand.

MR SHERINGHAM

I

THE schoolroom was deserted because an uncle, who had come to Bayswater Square on a few days' visit, had taken the children to the Zoological Gardens for the afternoon. He had not invited Miss Ferrers, their governess, to join the party; and after she had tidied the schoolroom and had done various out-of-door commissions for the mistress of the house, she returned to her kingdom on the fourth floor and sat down to rest. Next day she was going to the seaside with the family, and she still had to pack for herself and the children; but she was too tired to begin directly. The hot weather had come with a rush, and she had been on her feet for hours. Mrs Hunter and her grown-up daughters had agreed at lunch-time that they were not inclined to move, so Amabel Ferrers had been obliged to move for them from shop to shop and back to the house again, until her little body was aweary of this great world.

It was not agreeable to live in Mrs Hunter's house as governess, and Amabel would have left long ago if she had known how to get food and shelter elsewhere.

But a governess is not a cook with the market at her command, and Amabel knew that if she threw up this engagement she might be reduced to any straits before she found another. Her story, so far, was the commonest story in the world. Her parents had brought her up in idleness, and, if they ever gave a thought to the future at all, had taken for granted that she would marry in their lifetime. Unfortunately, they both died before she was eighteen; the mother died after the father, and left just enough to pay for her funeral. Amabel was an only child, and knew of no relations except an uncle who had gone to Mexico, twenty years ago, to seek his fortune. As he never wrote home she did not know whether he was dead or alive, but she had found an old address amongst her father's papers, and had written there at a venture some months ago. So far no answer had come, and she had made up her mind that her Uncle Michael was dead or out of reach, and that she was alone in the world.

This afternoon, as she stared at the sky and the chimney-pots, her thoughts were vexatious and distressing. For several days past Mrs Hunter's manner had been more unpleasant than usual, and it would be impossible to say anything stronger than that of anyone's manner. Amabel knew why she was in disgrace. A fortnight ago there had been a children's party in the house, and she had assisted at it, and Mr Sheringham himself had shown her marked attention. No one else would have mattered quite so much. But Mr Sheringham! the great financier! who was invited a dozen times before he came once! who was to marry Georgina Hunter, if only he could be made to see it! who was so eligible that Georgina hardly expected to

pull it off, but wished she might, because Mr Sheringham was *so* good-looking; while Mr Mendoza, the other string to her bow, was fat and had little pig's eyes! That children's party had been a fiasco from Georgina's point of view, and there was worse to follow. On Sunday last, Mr Sheringham had met Miss Ferrers at morning service, and had walked home with her and the children; and the day before yesterday he had actually found her in Kensington Gardens in the late afternoon, and had stayed talking to her for nearly half an hour. On both occasions the children had carried the news home, and Mrs Hunter had told Amabel that her conduct was forward and unladylike, and that if the offence was repeated she must take the consequences.

This very afternoon the offence had been repeated. She had happened to be in the drawing-room taking instructions about some errands, and Mr Sheringham had called, and he had looked at her in the most friendly way, and asked her if she was going to Eastbourne with the family. When she admitted that she was, he said he thought of running down there himself for a few days; and when she hurried out of the room he got up and opened the door for her. She wished he would leave her alone. She was a moth and he was a star, and she was a sensible moth with no desire to singe her wings. She would not let her thoughts dwell on him; but her thoughts dwelt with foreboding on Miss Georgina Hunter's manner when she met her on the stairs just now.

The irruption into the room of a red-headed page-boy, with a message from Mrs Hunter, made her jump.

" Mrs 'Unter wants you downstairs," he said.

" I've been out ever since lunch and I haven't had tea yet," said Amabel, trying to seem calm and indifferent. " Do you think Mrs Hunter wants me at once, George ? "

" She looked as if she did," said the boy.

" I wonder why tea is so late ? "

" I 'eard Mrs 'Unter tell Mary she needn't bring any up 'ere as the young ladies and gentlemen would 'ave theirs out. Shall I sneak you up a cup from the kitchen, Miss ? "

" Yes—no—I can't wait," said Amabel, and she ran downstairs.

Mrs Hunter sat in her drawing-room surrounded by lamps and silver photograph-frames and frilled silk cushions. She was a stupid-looking woman, with a consequential, pursed-up mouth and hard, colourless eyes. She turned towards Amabel with an air of dislike, and did not ask her to sit down.

" I am not satisfied with you, Miss Ferrers," she began. " I have sent for you to tell you so."

" I am doing my best for the children," began Amabel.

" I am not thinking of the children," said Mrs Hunter.

Amabel wished she had the courage to sit down, she wished she had stayed herself with tea, she wished she had been born without a temper ; and she looked at the lady and wondered why people in fortune's good graces should be so unkind to people at odds with fortune.

" Your behaviour is most unbecoming," continued Mrs Hunter.

"In what way?" said Amabel.

"I am not going to enter into details," said Mrs Hunter. "The fact is, you allow your head to be turned. You seem to think that when you come downstairs and the gentlemen who visit at the house are civil to you, that you are on an equality with them. I feel it my duty to open your eyes. None of them would ever think of you seriously."

Amabel did not speak, but she could not force back the flush of indignant colour in her cheeks or the anger that set her mouth and flashed in her eyes.

"That is the worst of people who have come down in the world," said Mrs Hunter. "They never want to realise that they have come down."

"Oh, but they do," said Amabel. "The fact is everlastingly forced on them."

"Then you don't show it in your behaviour. Just now when Mr Sheringham was here——"

"I should be glad if I need never see Mr Sheringham again," cried Amabel. "I don't care about him."

According to her lights at the moment she spoke the truth. She felt angry with Mr Sheringham for having made matters worse for her than they need have been; she felt angry with his coolness and his determination and with her own helplessness.

"What unladylike expressions you use, Miss Ferrers!" said Mrs Hunter. "It is not necessary that you should care about Mr Sheringham or anyone else you have the privilege of meeting in my house. Mr Sheringham is a most charming person and an intimate friend, and it must be painful for him to come here and meet a young woman who throws herself at his head."

"I should think his head is fairly strong," said Amabel.

"At any rate I am going to do my duty and stop it," said Mrs Hunter, who was working herself into a pretty passion. "Unless you can give me a guarantee of better behaviour for the future——"

"How can I give you a guarantee that the man won't follow me to church or find out when I'm in the Square with the children?" said Amabel, her anger inexpediently expressing itself.

"To whom are you alluding, Miss Ferrers?"

"To Mr Sheringham, of course."

"Then be good enough to give him his proper title. I am not accustomed to hear one of my friends spoken of as a 'man.' However, your impertinence only confirms me in my intentions. I shall not take you to Eastbourne with us, and as we leave the house to-morrow you must leave to-morrow too. I may as well pay you your wages, and then we need not meet again. It will be pleasanter for both sides."

"Of course you know that you are treating me abominably," said Amabel. "If I were a kitchen-maid——"

"Kitchenmaids have a market value," said Mrs Hunter. "Incompetent young ladies have none."

"I have nowhere to go to from here."

"That is not my business."

"I have done nothing to deserve such treatment."

"I refuse to prolong the discussion," said Mrs Hunter, holding out a five-pound note. "I owe you for one month, and I will pay you for two. It is more than you deserve."

"It is my legal due," said Amabel; "and I believe you ought to pay me board wages too."

"I shall not pay you another penny," said Mrs Hunter, and the note fluttered from her fingers and fell on the floor. "Remember you are leaving more or less under a cloud."

"That is a disgraceful thing to say," exclaimed Amabel.

"I shall say it to anyone who comes here for your character," said Mrs Hunter. "I consider you flighty and impertinent."

Amabel felt that she had no weapons and no hope of redress. She could not rail back as a woman of coarser grain would have done. She picked up the bank-note and ran hastily out of the room, and then she burst into tears. She was still crying when the red-headed page-boy came into the schoolroom with a cup of tea and a plate of bread-and-butter on a tray. He looked at the girl and went away again. In a few minutes Amabel heard a slow, heavy step on the stairs, and she dried her eyes and tried to pull herself together, because she thought it must be Mrs Hunter. But the door opened and the cook appeared, panting and good-natured.

"Ginger said you were crying, Miss," she began; "I thought I'd come and see. Ain't you well?"

"I'm to leave the house to-morrow, Mrs Pugsley," said Amabel. "Do you know of any cheap, respectable room? I've nowhere to go."

The cook sat down.

"Why are you to leave the house to-morrow?" she inquired; and Amabel saw that everyone would

ask her the same question, and that it would be difficult to answer.

" Mrs Hunter is not satisfied," she said ; " I think she has taken a dislike to me."

" Mrs 'Unter is not a lady," said the cook, with the queer discrimination of her class in such matters. " You are. That's reason enough, I'll be bound. Don't you fret, Miss. I'll go round to the office I patronise to-morrow, and I'll tell 'em if they don't find you something soft within a week they won't 'ave me on their books again, nor any of my friends."

" It's very kind of you," said Amabel, cheering up a little, " but I'm afraid no one will take me without a reference."

" Well ! " said the cook, beginning to bristle.

" Mrs Hunter refuses me a good one."

" Then I shall have a few words with Mrs 'Unter to-morrow morning," said the cook majestically. " She won't let me go if she can 'elp it. A better behaved young lady I never saw—and them children so spoiled and quarrelsome, Job 'imself would give 'em a good hiding, and of course it's what they deserve."

At that moment George's red head thrust itself cautiously in at the door.

" Now, what do you want, Ginger ? " said the cook. " Don't you see I'm engaged ? "

The boy held a telegram towards her, and she took it from him.

" You needn't wait," she said ; and, when he had shut the door, she turned to Amabel.

" Ginger is that curious. It's for you, Miss," she said.

II

"For me!" cried Amabel. She could hardly believe it; but she saw her name on the orange-coloured envelope and on the form inside.

"Come and see me; Paris. Cannot leave. Hôtel Ritz.—MICHAEL FERRERS."

"How extraordinary!" said Amabel, and she showed the form to her friend.

"What's it mean?" said the cook. "I never can make head nor tail of a telegram. Why can't people write a plain letter? If there was less hurry there'd be less mistakes, I always tell my kitchen-maids. But you may preach all your life and you won't persuade other folks to practise."

"I suppose," said Amabel, and she took the telegram into her hands again—"I suppose it is from my uncle, Michael Ferrers. I wrote to him some months ago. I thought he was in South America, but this seems to come from Paris."

"How do you know?" said the cook suspiciously, and they examined the telegram together. When Amabel lifted her head she pointed to the five-pound note lying on the table.

"That is all the money I have in the world," said she.

"Lor!" said the cook.

"And if I spend it on going to Paris——"

"And find it was one of them lying telegrams, and you hadn't no uncle at all, and there was no such hotel."

"I don't see how that could happen," said Amabel.

"Anything can happen with telegrams," said the cook, "else what'd the halfpenny papers do? 'Horrible massacre!' one day: 'Women and children tortured: nobody left alive!' and next day everyone all right, and the news as flat as pancakes. I know them telegrams. And yet, seeing how you're placed, it do seem worth a little risk—just to go there and drive up to the hotel—if you can find it—and ask if they know your uncle—and come straight back if they don't."

Here the cook raised her voice. "Ginger!" she cried; and when Ginger immediately opened the door, she winked at Amabel.

"I knew you wouldn't be far off," she said placidly; "you run round to Whiteley's as fast as your feet'll carry you, and go to that counter where they have the railway time-tables laid out—somewhere near the provisions, it is—say you want to get to Paris quick and cheap. You won't have to pay—but here's twopence in case you do—and mind you're back in five minutes."

"And what'll I say if SHE rings?" said the boy in injured accents.

"Say I sent you for a lemon," said the cook. "Here's another penny. Bring one."

"If I go—and spend my money—and nothing comes of it—I shall be worse off than before," said Amabel, when the boy had run off.

"You mustn't look forward to that," said the cook. "Turn a bright face to the world and the world'll turn a bright face to you. Besides, you can always come back here and lodge with my sister in

the Artesian Road, as is a widow. Don't you trouble too much. It's no good, and it spoils the complexion."

"I wish I could cook," said Amabel. "I should never be out of work then."

"P'r'aps you'd sometimes wish you were—when the hot weather comes and the jellies are uncertain. Every perfession has its drawbacks," said the cook; and then Amabel went on with her tea, and presently Ginger came back with various time-tables.

"If I go by Newhaven and Dieppe to-morrow, I shall get there at seven," said Amabel in a little while. "Oh, Cookie dear, am I really going to risk half my fortune! The single fare is £1, 5s.; the return is——"

"Don't take a return," advised the cook. "It looks distrustful. I must go and see to my dinner now, my dear, because last time I let Maria do the quenelles she sent 'em up in a mash. But I'll see you off from Victoria to-morrow morning."

"I can't believe I'm going," said Amabel. "I can't believe in that telegram."

"It's a chance," said the cook, "and if you don't take a chance in this world, where are you? I daresay it won't be all jam in Paris any more nor what it is here. Your uncle may have a wife, and she may have a temper; but if he's one to like a pretty face and figure you'll do. You're not as unlucky as you think you are, and that's a fact. You can't expect everything of them above, and as far as eyes and hair and shape go, they've done pretty well for you."

Amabel looked in the glass when her friend had departed, and she certainly saw a charming girl reflected there. Her hair was thick and bright and

wavy, her eyes were grey, her nose straightly cut and delicate; and besides beauty of feature she possessed just now the beauty of youth, and would always possess the beauty of expression that is the outward sign of kindness and intelligence. The sudden change in her prospects had dried her tears and diverted her thoughts, and as she packed for the children and herself, she dwelt on the uncertain issues of to-morrow instead of fretting over the offences of to-day. She tried to remember everything her father had ever said of his brother Michael, and she could not remember much. She did not know of any estrangement to account for her uncle's long silence. Her parents had believed him to be dead, and when she found his name above an address in a Spanish-sounding South American town, she had written as people write to someone quite unknown, in a spirit of adventure and with uncertain hope of a reply.

The evening passed quickly. The children came back and kept her busy, and when they were in bed she still had a good deal to do. It was midnight before she had finished, and then she fell asleep, and woke with a start next morning when a maid came in with a cup of tea sent upstairs by the cook. Amabel drank it as she was dressing.

"Why are you putting on your hat?" said Florrie, the elder of two children who slept in the room.

"Because I am going away," said Amabel.

"I know you are going away. Mamma told me last night she would not keep you any longer because you were not setting Guinevere and me a good example. But she said you were to give us our breakfast first as usual."

"I'm afraid I can't stay for that," said Amabel, putting on her veil.

"But you must if mamma tells you to," said the child, with a good imitation of her mother's pompous manner; and as Amabel took no notice she jumped out of bed and ran downstairs to lodge a complaint.

Luckily for Amabel her trunk had been carried down by Ginger and a housemaid the night before, but she was stopped herself this morning by the apparition of Mrs Hunter in a quilted dressing-gown and curling-pins.

"Miss Ferrers," she said, "be good enough to go upstairs again at once and give the children their breakfast. You will leave this house when we leave for Eastbourne, and not a moment before."

"I must leave at once," said Amabel, and she took another step towards the last flight of stairs; but Mrs Hunter's portly figure barred the way.

"Come along, Miss," said a fat, good-tempered voice from below, "the cab's here."

"Cook!" said Mrs Hunter, and she went downstairs herself, followed, of course, by Amabel. Ginger was in the hall as well as the cook.

"It's all right, mum," said the cook. "I'll be back before you're ready to give orders. I'm only going as far as Victoria to see Miss Ferrers off."

"Victoria! Didn't you tell me yesterday you had nowhere to go, you wicked, deceitful girl!—trying to excite my pity on false pretences."

"There wasn't much false pretences," said the cook, for Amabel would not condescend to speak. "Things is like weather, and take up sudden for the better sometimes. Miss Ferrers had an invitation she didn't

expect last night to go and stay with an uncle in Paris at the Hôtel—— What was the name of the hotel, Miss ? "

" The Hôtel Ritz," said Amabel.

" A likely story," said Mrs Hunter. " Dukes and millionaires stay at the Hôtel Ritz."

" I shouldn't mind either the one or the other in my family," said the cook, and she followed Amabel down the front steps.

" I'm sure you'll lose your place on my account," said Amabel regretfully, as they drove away.

" Lor' bless you, my dear ! I can get twenty places an hour and pick and choose," said her champion. " Think o' my made dishes and my gravies ! I've rather a fancy to go and live with an earl. I read such a lot about earls in all them Family Story-tellers, but I ain't never rolled out pastry for one. I don't see why I shouldn't as good as another. After all, pastry is pastry and nothing else, whether it's for an earl or a gentleman."

" You're the only friend I'm leaving in London," said Amabel as the train moved out of the station.

" And I hope you'll soon be back with one better worth looking at," said the cook.

Amabel's fellow-pilgrims certainly seemed to think her worth looking at, and she travelled with some pleasant people, who helped her through the Douane and into a cab at Paris. As she drove through the twinkling streets to the Place Vendôme, all the hopes and doubts that had possessed her since yesterday reached their height, and when the driver stopped at the doors of the hotel and a porter came forward, Amabel hardly had breath enough to bring out her

uncle's name. But the man only signed her inside the hotel, and there she had to do with a clerk, who spoke English—said that Mr Ferrers was in, and invited her to wait in a room close by. She sat down and looked through the window at the courtyard, which was gay with plants and full of people sitting at little tables. Through the open door of the room she saw other people pass through the hall, in and out of the hotel, and from the square outside she heard the rumble of wheels, the tuff-tuff of automobiles, and the cries of paper boys with the latest edition of *La Patrie*. But her impressions were blurred, for her thoughts were fixed entirely on the unknown uncle, and every pulse in her body seemed to wait for his arrival. But the noise and the movement went on around her, and no one came into the room. She stared out at the courtyard; she watched the hall; the minutes passed very slowly. At last she went up to the centre table, found some English papers there, and turned over the pages of the *Times*. When she looked towards the door again, a man of middle age had come inside the room, and stood there watching her. He shut the door as she went towards him.

III

"I am Amabel Ferrers," she said.

"I am Michael Ferrers," said he; and then for a moment they took stock of each other. He was a grizzled, wiry-looking man, and he seemed to be in a hurry; and his eyes, though they were fixed on her, were preoccupied.

"You're very much like your father," he said;

" when he was a boy he was so pretty that strangers used to stop him in the street and ask him his name. Everyone took to him at once."

" Some people take a dislike to me," said Amabel, thinking of Mrs Hunter and her family.

" I don't think I shall," said Mr Ferrers; " I'm glad you've come. I shall have ten days or so here, unless anything goes wrong with the Eugenia, and then back I go to Mexico."

Amabel felt dreadfully disappointed. If her uncle was going to the other end of the world in a short ten days, nothing much would come of her acquaintance with him. She wondered who Eugenia was, and why Mr Ferrers spoke of her with the definite article.

" Your letter crawled round the world after me," he continued. " I got it in Japan. I was very sorry to hear my brother and his wife were both dead. I always meant to look them up, but I haven't been as near England as this for twenty years, and I never write letters. You didn't tell me much in yours. Are you an only child ? "

" Yes," said Amabel; " I've neither kith nor kin—except you."

" What have you been doing, then, since your parents died ? "

" I was in a situation as governess till this morning."

" Bless me ! didn't my brother make money ? "

" Never very much, and when mother died there wasn't five pounds. I didn't tell you in my letter, because I thought you might be as poor as I was. If you are going back to Mexico, Uncle Michael, I'm afraid I ought to go straight back to London and find a new situation. The money I have won't last many

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days, and I don't know anyone in London to help me except a cook——"

"A cook!"

"Yes—where I was governess—she was very kind, but, of course, she is not well off and——"

"But I am," interrupted Mr Ferrers. "I wish I'd known about your father. It puzzles me why anyone who wants money shouldn't get it. If the Eugenia behaves as I expect she will, I shall have more money than *I* want soon."

"Is she—are you—is the Eugenia my aunt?" said Amabel.

"The Eugenia is a mine," said Mr Ferrers seriously. "I am not married."

"I wish you were," said Amabel.

"You must find a wife for me, then," said Mr Ferrers; "I've never had time. But you needn't think about going back to London yet. I'll order you a room and something to eat, and when you're ready come down here again and let me know. I've two people dining with me, and I must go back to them."

"Are they very smart people?" said Amabel a little later, when she had dressed and dined and found her uncle again. "I don't suppose you know what a smart woman would think of my clothes, and I've put on my Sunday frock."

"The Varasdins are Hungarians," said Mr Ferrers, leading the way to the courtyard. "I only know them through doing business with the husband. She appears to be an agreeable woman. I never saw her till to-night. I think she's in black. They both speak English. They have suggested that we should

go out somewhere—to a café, I suppose. It will be more entertaining for you than sitting still here."

Mr Ferrers stopped near one of the little tables, and introduced Amabel to the two people waiting for him there. The husband was a tall, flabby-looking man, with shifty brown eyes and a head of hair that wanted cutting. He made Amabel an elaborate bow, and at once engaged her in conversation; but she found it difficult to attend to him because her fascinated eyes returned again and again to the brilliant figure of his wife. Even judged by the French standard of beauty, which differs so much from our own, Mme. Varasdin was not a beautiful woman; and judged by the English and the Greek ideals, she was positively plain. In colouring and in feature she could no more compare with Amabel than the monkey on a barrel organ can compare with the charming Italian boy who pets him. She had dark, very narrow eyes, a big mouth, a sallow skin, and stiff black hair rolled back from her face in Japanese fashion. But she had the manner and the glances of a woman who has found times without number that she is irresistible; she was as graceful as a cat, she talked with vivacity, and she dressed with art. When Amabel appeared, she said a civil word or two, and then seemed to make up her mind that a girl in such a blouse and skirt was not one to reckon with. So she settled her long feather boa and entertained Mr Ferrers and looked about her. In a little while her attention seemed to fix itself on a young man sitting at a table opposite their own, and when her party got up to go she went a little out of her way in order to pass close by him. There could be no doubt as to his nationality. He was well groomed, he was

drinking a whisky-and-soda, he was reading *Punch* and the *Times*. As Mme. Varasdin rustled past him, he looked up and at once sprang to his feet. His manner expressed ardent pleasure, but his British tongue said, "Oh, Mme. Varasdin!" and then stopped short. He seemed to know the husband too, and shook hands with him as if he only half liked the obligation.

Mme. Varasdin mentioned to the others that he was Mr Newby, and then she sat down at his table and talked to him, and Amabel thought she had never seen anyone smile so brilliantly or express so much with her hands. But Mr Ferrers soon grew impatient.

"We ought to be going," he said to M. Varasdin; and Varasdin said to his wife in a diffident voice:

"Mr Ferrers thinks we should go now, Anastasie."

Anastasie's eyes almost shut as she just glanced at her husband.

"Go on," she said; "I will come when I am ready. Mr Newby will escort me, I know."

"Rather," said Mr Newby.

Varasdin was evidently used to doing as he was bid. He found a cab outside the hotel for his companions and himself, and drove with them to the Café de Paris. On the way he told Mr Ferrers that his wife had met Mr Newby at Aix-les-Bains last year, and that he had a large income and was very sympathetic.

Amabel was amused by the little grunt with which her uncle received this account of their new acquaintance, but after that she did not listen to what the two men were saying, because they began to talk of business, and she was bewitched by the sights and lights of Paris. When they were seated within the

café, her uncle ordered ice for her and bocks for M. Varasdin and himself, and they watched the midnight life of the city coming and going in fine raiment. They had been there for some time when Mme. Varasdin appeared with Mr Newby; and though the café was full of well-dressed women, all eyes followed her because she was strikingly tall and graceful and wore fine diamonds and a fine cloak. The cloak had hanging sleeves and an amazing ruffled collar and gold embroideries, and a Venetian painter would have shown you Anastasie framed and draped with it, and you would have turned like the rest of that company from Amabel, who was a beauty, to the woman who was plain.

She sat down and ordered little hot crayfish that she ate without bread or sauces and with the help of her fingers. She had lithe-looking, long hands, and they blazed with jewels, and Amabel first watched her and then turned away. The lady made her meal as her neighbours did, and yet it was unpleasant to see her delicate fingers tear the little creatures asunder. Amabel was a matter-of-fact Briton and not fanciful; yet it crossed her fancy that Mme. Varasdin would have destroyed the crayfish with the same quickness and appetite if they had been alive. When she had finished, she pushed back her chair and talked to Mr Ferrers and Mr Newby. Her English was fluent and correct, and her foreign accent gave point to her stories, which were all of cosmopolitan people and in cynical demonstration of human folly. Their flavour was not sweet in the memory, but they suited the hour, because the hour was dominated by the lady who told them. For all the notice anyone took of Amabel she

might have been a wooden dummy; but she looked and listened and felt very well amused. It was after midnight when Mme. Varasdin suddenly got up.

"Look at these women in mourning," she said audibly; "they are taking the table opposite us. We don't want to sit and stare at them. I hate anything gloomy."

"Are you busy to-morrow, Mme. Varasdin?" said Mr Ferrers.

The lady glanced at Mr Newby, who turned red.

"Do you want me to take your niece to see the Tomb of Napoleon?" she asked.

"Something of the kind," said Mr Ferrers. "I shall be busy till five. Could you come to lunch, and then take Amabel to the right milliners? I believe they are more important than the Tomb."

"I will come with pleasure," said Mme. Varasdin. "I have one engagement to-morrow, but I can fix any time I choose for it. I will call for your niece in the morning and we will have lunch together, and at five—at five, when you are free, Mr Ferrers, you will find us at Colombin's, the tea-house in the Rue Cambon, you know. Can I depend on you to pick us up there?"

"Certainly!" said Mr Ferrers. "But how about your other engagement?"

"Six o'clock will do for that," said Mme. Varasdin. "We don't dine till half-past seven. Mr Newby, will you dine with us to-morrow at half-past seven?"

"With pleasure," said Mr Newby.

"I wish Varasdin had half the wits of his wife," said Mr Ferrers to Amabel, as they drove home to-

gether. "I call her a very agreeable woman, don't you?"

"Ye-ès," said Amabel, with the uncertain assent that points to a contrary opinion. She could not keep her eyes off Mme. Varasdin, but she was not at all sure that she thought her agreeable.

IV

Amabel had not seen the Tomb of Napoleon yet, but she had seen a Paris dressmaker and several Paris shops, and now she sat at one of Colombin's tea-tables, in a blouse and a hat and a ruffle that changed her in a twinkling from a moth to a butterfly. Her uncle had taken her breath away that morning by telling her, all in a hurry, while he drank his coffee and glanced at his financial papers, that he meant to provide for her, and that, as he had to be in Paris on and off till this affair of the Eugenia was settled, she might stay there for the present—in the hotel at first, and, when he ran back to Mexico, in a family or a pension.

"You must ask Mme. Varasdin about clothes," he said, with a glance at his niece's worse-for-wear guinea coat and skirt. "She appears to understand them. You can't go about with her dressed like a country cousin. I've plenty of money and nothing much to do with it, and no one belonging to me. You may just as well have a good time. I like the way you came here—straight off, on the chance. I've done things of that sort myself, and I'm on the top of the wave now. Here is some French money."

Mr Ferrers had taken out a pocket-book and was

extracting French bank-notes from it. He put five beside her, and she saw that each one was for a thousand francs.

"Oh!" she said, and her uncle looked at her with amusement. He enjoyed her surprise and confusion, and he enjoyed using some of his money in this novel way.

"It won't last you long if you go shopping with Mme. Varasdin," he said. "She looks expensive. I don't know how a fool like her husband manages to pay for those diamonds."

"Is M. Varasdin a fool?" said Amabel.

"He's a fool who's always telling you he's a clever fellow," said Mr Ferrers. "I'd any time rather deal with a clever fellow who tells me he's a fool."

Then he got up and put away his pocket-book, and said to Amabel that he must go about his business now, but that, if nothing happened to prevent it, he would take her to the opera to-night; and Amabel got ready for Mme. Varasdin, having made up her mind that the first thing she would buy should be a silk dress for the cook.

"What do you want?" said Mme. Varasdin, as they sat at lunch together.

"I believe I want everything—from your point of view," said Amabel, for the lady's walking gown and hat were as elegant as her evening raiment had been. "I am sure you would say my clothes were only fit for a bonfire."

"Clothes cost money," said Mme. Varasdin, with the smile that seemed to shut her eyes. "Have you any idea of Paris prices? For a coat and skirt I pay my tailor——"

She paused, and her glance gauged Amabel's poor shrunken coat and skirt, and Amabel felt quite uncomfortable and in a hurry to cast it from her.

"The gown I am wearing cost twenty guineas," Mme. Varasdin continued. "The little man who made it is rather clever. You might order two or three things from him to begin with."

"My uncle gave me five thousand francs this morning," said Amabel. "I thought it was a great deal and would last a long time. I should not like to spend it extravagantly."

"It won't go far if you want everything," said Mme. Varasdin. "From what Hyacinth tells me of your uncle he could give you five thousand francs a week and never know he was spending money. But men are all the same. They expect a woman to spend a thousand francs and look like a thousand pounds. I told Hyacinth this morning that I wanted a new hat, and he threatened to commit suicide."

"Does he often do that?" said Amabel, puzzled by the lady's tranquil manner.

"Whenever anything annoys him," said Mme. Varasdin. Then they called a cab and began the business of the day, and long before five o'clock Amabel had spent most of her money. She had bought the silk dress and despatched it to the cook, and she had presented Mme. Varasdin with a hat that the lady tried on and put down with a sigh because it cost five guineas. Amabel hardly ventured to offer it, but Mme. Varasdin made the way easy for her, and accepted it with so much grace that the girl saw she had done the right thing. And now here they were at Colombin's drinking tea, and eating little

muffins, and looking at English cakes that were not quite what English cakes should be, because they were neither stale nor stodgy. The rooms were very full and cheerful, and most people were talking English and American.

"Are there no French people in Paris?" said Amabel.

"It is not easy to come across them," said Mme. Varasdin. "I have lived here for a year and know none."

"Where did you live before?" said Amabel, and as the question passed her lips she knew she would have done better not to ask it.

"I have lived in every capital in Europe," said Mme. Varasdin. "My husband's affairs are always taking him to fresh places."

As she replied her husband came in, accompanied by Mr Ferrers. The two men were talking as they crossed the outer shop. They stopped inside the room to talk, and when they reached their own party they were still at the height of their argument, and had only a formal greeting for the ladies.

"What has happened?" said Mme. Varasdin.

"That's what we want to know," said her husband.

"It's Eugenias," said Mr Ferrers, "and I believe it's Mexican Jem."

He looked cool and angry, and M. Varasdin looked uncomfortable. Amabel began to understand that the money she had been spending so easily was not always made with ease of mind.

"Something must have gone wrong over there," said M. Varasdin.

"I don't believe it," said Mr Ferrers. "Mexican Jem is banging the market; that's all."

"But Eugenias are on offer all over the place," said M. Varasdin in an explanatory way to his wife. "They're as flat as ditchwater. It's easy enough to say it's banging——"

"Can't you find out what has happened?" said Mme. Varasdin.

"No, we can't," said Mr Ferrers. "The mine is fifty miles from anywhere. Of course, we have wired to the new manager, but we have had no answer."

"Who is Mexican Jem?" said Amabel.

"A man who was buying all the Eugenias he could get a week or two ago," said her uncle.

"But he's off them now, and I wish I was," said M. Varasdin. "It's too much of a gamble."

"Have you any?" said his wife.

"I'm sorry to say I have a thousand in my pocket."

He opened a letter case, and took from it the certificate of the shares. It lay open on the table for anyone to see, and Amabel looked at the wording curiously.

"Well, I've made up my mind," said Mr Ferrers; "I'm going straight over there. In case anything has gone wrong, I'd rather be on the spot. But I shall leave orders that if Mexican Jem offers a line to-morrow they are taken for me."

"What we want is to get Wolfenstein interested in them," said M. Varasdin. "He would strengthen our faction."

"Wolfenstein's hands are not clean," said Mr Ferrers.

Varasdin shrugged his shoulders.

"Business is business," said he; "Wolfenstein is a very clever man. He made a quarter of a million last year, and this year he's doing better still; and you should see the names of the people who go to his wife's parties. They don't seem to mind about his hands."

"I'm rather nice about my name," said Mr Ferrers. "I've never been mixed up with a shady lot yet."

"If you talk like that to my husband he will think you are not a good man of business," said Mme. Varasdin.

"Well, I'm going to score off Mexican Jem," said Mr Ferrers.

"Or he'll score off us," said M. Varasdin, looking dolefully at the Eugenia shares.

Amabel thought her uncle's glance took the other man's measure and found him wanting.

"I'll let you out if you like," said Mr Ferrers; "I'll take back your little lot."

"Done," said Varasdin eagerly.

"Perhaps you are throwing away a good thing," said Mme. Varasdin rather anxiously. Mr Ferrers had taken out his cheque-book, and was filling in a cheque.

"I'll give you your thousand pounds," he said, with an air of conviction that was impressive. "You couldn't get the price in London or here this afternoon. But I believe in Eugenias."

"I can't afford a gamble," said Varasdin sulkily. "My expenses are too heavy."

Mr Ferrers tore off the cheque and presented it to

M. Varasdin. For a few minutes there was a lull at that particular tea-table, and Amabel wondered what was going to happen. She saw that her uncle's thoughts were far away from the Parisian tea-house. He consulted first a calendar and then a railway time-table, and then he looked at his watch.

"I can just do it," he said. "But I must be at the Nord in half an hour."

As if each minute had grown precious, he pushed back his chair and got up, but his eyes fell on Amabel, and he sat down again. She looked at him expectantly.

"I can't take you to the opera till I come back," he said; "I must go to Mexico at once and find out what has happened. I'll leave you all the French money I have, and I'll pay up at the hotel, and I'll send you a cheque. You mustn't stay on at the Ritz by yourself. Mme. Varasdin, can you tell my niece of a comfortable pension? If not, she had better go straight to England."

"When shall you be back, Uncle Michael?" said Amabel, and she looked at him rather wistfully.

"It is sure to be weeks, it might be months," said Mr Ferrers. "I may find the new manager is making a mess of things. You must send me your address, of course. I'll wire you mine. You'll be all right, you know. So shall I — at least I hope I shall. Anyhow—if I'm not all right—give me that certificate, Varasdin—I believe you will be with this—but take care of it, my dear—they're bearer shares."

"What is it?" said Amabel, taking the paper from her uncle.

"It's a thousand Eugenias," said Mr Ferrers.

"Mademoiselle enters the affair in the pleasantest

way," said M. Varasdin. "She takes no risk, and the chance of a big profit. Even to-day, when things look so black, that little bit of paper could be sold for eight or nine hundred pounds, mademoiselle."

"But I have just seen you sell it for a thousand," Amabel reminded him.

"The prices of such things go up and down," her uncle explained to her. "These shares may be worth a good many thousands soon. Keep them tight till I wire to you to sell, and remember that they are unregistered and can be stolen as easily as a bank-note."

"But how shall I sell them?" said Amabel.

"Go to a respectable stockbroker," said Mr Ferrers.

"I don't know one," said Amabel.

"You know me," said M. Varasdin. "I shall be happy to give you any assistance in my power while your uncle is away."

"Are you a stockbroker?" said Amabel.

"I am not exactly on the Bourse," said M. Varasdin, taking a fine attitude. "I keep outside and have more scope. I am what you call a financier."

"Oh!" said Amabel uncomprehendingly; and she took the certificate of the shares back from Mme. Varasdin, who had been studying it intently. "I suppose I'm worth robbing," she said to her uncle, as she put the certificate and the French money into her purse.

"You will be in six weeks' time, I hope," said he; and then he got up, and his glance lingered a little on her pretty face, and he could see that she was more concerned about his going away than about the money he had given her.

"Come back soon, Uncle Michael," she said, as she stood at the door with him for a moment.

"Suppose I didn't—you'd be all right, you know, my dear. If I live I'll send you money; and if I don't, you're my legal heir. I'll write to my solicitors and tell them about you before I leave New York. Take care of your Eugenias, and don't trust that Varasdin too much. I heard things I don't like about him to-day. I'm glad to have done with him as far as business goes. I daresay he'll do in private life."

"What do you think of Mme. Varasdin?" said Amabel rather anxiously.

"I think she's a clever woman," said Mr Ferrers, signing to a cab-driver. "She will tell you how to dress and where to live, and that is all you want of her. I could see she was furious because her husband wouldn't keep his Eugenias. She has the wit to believe in me. I'm not going to take you with me now, because I must race the clock, and you'd be in my way. You talk to Mme. Varasdin about a boarding-house, and settle in somewhere to-night. I shall be back before you've time to turn round. Good-bye."

Mr Ferrers kissed his niece and took off his hat to the Varasdins, who were approaching the door. He showed the cab-driver a twenty-franc piece, and told him what he must do to get it, and so in a twinkling he clattered out of the narrow side-street into the Rue de Rivoli. Amabel watched the cab, and then walked slowly towards the Boulevards with the Varasdins. She felt forlorn.

"What are you going to do now, mademoiselle?" said M. Varasdin.

"My uncle told me to make inquiries about a pension," said Amabel. "Do you know of one?"

"How would you like to come and stay with us?" said Mme. Varasdin.

V

"With you?" repeated Amabel, a good deal surprised and puzzled. The proposal was made in such a business-like tone that she guessed a business-like idea must be at the back of it; and she looked at Mme. Varasdin's hat and gown and jewels, and wondered.

"We have a flat in the best part of Paris," continued Mme. Varasdin. "From our balcony you can see Mont Valerien if you look one way, and the Arc de Triomphe if you look the other. We are close to the Bois."

"But surely I should be in your way?" said Amabel.

"No," said Mme. Varasdin. "We have often had someone with us for a time. When my old friend, Baron Rosenmeyer, went on a financial mission to Turkey, he confided his only daughter to my care. He paid me—what is it in your English money?—seven guineas a week."

Twenty-four hours ago Amabel would have known that Mme. Varasdin asked too much; but the day's work had left her ideas about money quite topsy-turvy. In a city where people paid five guineas for a straw hat trimmed with a couple of quills, and thirty guineas for a cashmere gown, a guinea a day for board and lodging sounded almost moderate.

She had a pocketful of money, her uncle had promised her a cheque, and she had the thousand Eugenias.

"If you are quite sure I shall not be in your way——" she began again, embarrassed by the difficulty of rejecting the idea and uncertain whether she fancied it.

"Come and try," said Mme. Varasdin. "If you don't like us, you can any day go to a pension; but I think you will like us. I am sure your uncle would be glad to hear you were with me, and not with strangers."

So the matter was settled, and Amabel went back to the hotel and collected her things, and at seven o'clock she was driving out to Mme. Varasdin's flat in the Avenue Ernani. It was still light, and as she drove across the Place de la Concorde and up the Champs Elysées she felt glad that she was to stay in this beautiful, happy-looking city, where she would see the golden side of life, she who had seen the drab side ever since she could remember. She was adrift here, but she would have been adrift in London too, for she had no friends there. The few friends left to her lived in a grimy little Lancashire town, where her parents had lived and struggled with debt, and died. She loved her own country, but her memories of it, though they were tender, were sad. Her drive through Paris on this brilliant evening was like a dancing tune that sets your spirits dancing to its own measure.

Mme. Varasdin received her, and took her into a small drawing-room that communicated with a larger one by means of glass doors. It had a parqueted floor, the inevitable mirror over the mantelpiece, a

walnut centre table, and some damaged-looking red satin chairs.

'"This is the room I shall give you," said Mme. Varasdin. "The bedstead will be brought down from the attic after dinner; and there is a washstand too, the very one I bought for Amalie von Rosenmeyer. You see your window opens on to the balcony, so you will have a fine view."

Amabel thought she would rather have had a wardrobe and a chest of drawers. An anteroom with a table and chairs did not come up to her British ideas of comfort and privacy so well as a Bloomsbury attic where you can lock your one door and put away your clothes. The doors leading into the salon were curtained, but she could find neither key nor bolt to them; and through her window she could see the boots of someone sitting on the balcony.

"Mr Newby is here," said Mme. Varasdin. "He will dine with us. It is not necessary to dress for dinner. If you take off your hat you will be ready."

Amabel thought that, under the circumstances, a more prolonged toilet would have been difficult to manage; so she took off her hat and then followed her hostess on to the balcony. The boots, she found, belonged to Mr Newby, who rose to greet her. He looked younger than ever, and when he saw his hostess's tea-gown he stuck his monocle into his eye and said:

"I say, Mme. Varasdin! what a rippin' dress and what rippin' flowers! Did you have the flowers made for you? I never saw any like 'em!"

For Mme. Varasdin's toilet had not been accomplished by taking off her hat. She wore a loose

greenish-blue gown that hung as Amabel had never seen a gown hang before, and chains of uncut turquoises and great jewelled clasps and flowers with all the blues and greens of heaven blended in their petals.

"They are ixias," said Anastasie, and then M. Varasdin appeared and they went in to dinner.

It was a very good dinner, but Amabel did not know whether the talk that went on was good or bad, because she could not follow it. She was never quite sure whether people or speculations or both together were being discussed, and she felt rather pleased when M. Varasdin coupled together two names she had heard before, and told Mr Newby that Mexican Jem had cleared out of Eugenias, and that instead of rising like rockets they were dropping like sticks.

"I suppose even Mexican Jem may make a mistake," said Mr Newby.

"Well, I've left them alone," said M. Varasdin. "I'm afraid of a gamble, and I don't mind who knows it."

"What will happen to my Eugenias if they drop like sticks?" said Amabel. It was the first time she had entered into the conversation.

"Your Eugenias," said Mr Newby.

"My uncle gave me a thousand," said Amabel, and she opened the bag hanging at her side and passed the certificate across the table to Mr Newby. He glanced at it and was going to pass it back, when Mme. Varasdin took it from him.

"Sell them to me to-night for five hundred pounds," she said; "I love a gamble."

"Don't do it," said Varasdin, addressing his wife with such sudden and violent excitement that his two

guests felt quite alarmed. "Don't do it. Mexican Jem has got even. So have I, and we know what we are about. Mr Ferrers has given mademoiselle a bagatelle. In a fortnight they may not be worth five pounds. Besides, where will you get five hundred pounds? Do you think I will give five hundred pounds for such wickedness? Do you think I have them to give? Will you pay for your own gambles, then, madame? You always think you know best, and that I am a fool; but I, Hyacinth Louis Varasdin, tell you there is nothing in Eugenias, nothing at all."

He brought his hand down on the table with such a bang that his wine-glasses tottered, and the maid-servant nearly dropped the dish in her hands.

Anastasie only blinked at her husband.

"I don't agree with you, Varasdin," said Mr Newby, in his queer, high, young voice. "I believe they'll come out right in the end. If anyone had chucked a thousand at me I should stick to 'em."

"I must stick to them," said Amabel, restoring the certificate to her purse. "My uncle told me not to sell them till he wired."

"You must take care of your purse, then," said Mr Newby. "Anyone who stole it could sell them. They're bearer shares."

"What disagreeable ideas you have!" said Mme. Varasdin, getting up from the table.

But Mr Newby's manner had put Amabel uncomfortably on her guard, and for at least a week she slept with her purse under her pillow. She did not know what degree of distrust her fellow-countryman meant to instil, or which member of the household inspired it, but she thought it could not be Mme.

Varasdin. Mr Newby's case with regard to her was plain, and what puzzled Amabel was M. Varasdin's alternate blindness and fidgety interference. He fawned on the young man in his presence, and called him a "beefsteak" when his back was turned, and Amabel found that by a beefsteak her host meant someone rude and loutish and dull of mind. She wondered whether Mme. Varasdin called her names the moment she was out of hearing. Her respect for the husband and wife did not grow with her sojourn in their house, but they laid themselves out to please her, and she was neither uncomfortable nor unhappy as a rule. She soon discovered that they had dreadful and frequent scenes with each other, and at first, after hearing their voices raised in shrill vituperation, she used to feel ashamed to look them in the face. But they were so unashamed themselves that she began to take these storms for granted, as you take thunder for granted when you travel to a hotter climate. They were invariably about money, although Mr Newby's name somehow got mixed up with them every time.

Of course, Amabel's life had given her no social experience, but even she perceived that the Varasdins were not in a good position. They seemed to know no French people at all, but only a cosmopolitan rabble of artists and business men. The artists were obscure and impecunious, and the business men came from heaven knows where, and made their money heaven knows how. They would squander money one day and borrow the next, and as lief get the best of a bargain with a friend as with an enemy. Their womenkind were not always as doubtful and unpleasing as they were themselves. The matrons were

often absorbed in domestic affairs and greatly tried by the up and downs of life. There was one very fat lady who told Amabel that she never knew whether her husband would come back from business with a diamond necklace for her, or with a revolver that he proposed to hold first to her head and then to his own. She had been through every extreme of fortune with him, and had nearly starved while he was well fed in an Austrian prison. She was rather proud of the prison episode, and said that Mathias had been the victim of a brother's guile. But when Amabel saw Mathias she thought a man with those eyes could not be without guile himself. He was a good-natured person, devoted to his fat wife and his grown-up daughters, and inclined to make a pet of Amabel. Just at present he was living in great magnificence on the Champs Elysées, and the eldest daughter was about to marry a Berlin stockbroker. The Varasdins, with Amabel, were invited to the wedding and to a reception at the house the night before.

VI

The Varasdins were sitting on the balcony with Mr Newby and Amabel. Below them the long double line of young chestnuts stretched to right and left as far as the eye could follow, the tall white houses rose high above the trees, and the street lights flashed amongst their branches. The busy traffic of the city sounded far away, and the people strolling along the pavement were not present in any disturbing degree to the people on the balcony. At the windows of the opposite houses there was no sign of the inhabitants,

except the lace curtains with which they shut themselves in. The stars were coming out in a clear sky, and from the hills beyond the Bois a pleasant breeze swept through the avenue towards Paris.

"It is my birthday to-morrow," Mme. Varasdin was saying. "What will you give me, Hyacinth?"

"Everything I have is yours already," said Hyacinth.

"But you haven't much," said Anastasie. "I want a string of real pearls."

"I will give you the pearls and mademoiselle the Koh-i-noor on the same day. I can get one as easily as the other."

"Pearls are beastly expensive things," said Mr Newby. "Don't see much good in them either."

"You haven't seen the gown I am going to wear at the Gregorios'," said Mme. Varasdin; "pearls would be the making of it."

"How much is the gown going to cost?" inquired M. Varasdin.

"You will see when the bill comes in," said Anastasie blandly.

"Paris is a very costly place," said Amabel. "I've spent all the money Uncle Michael left me and about half the cheque he sent. I can't think what poor people do here. How do they exist, Mme. Varasdin?"

"I take no interest in them. It is so easy to make money that people who are poor are stupid. I prefer to contemplate people like the Gregorios. They understand the art of life."

"You mean they understand the art of swindling," said Mr Newby.

Amabel looked up rather startled and expecting Mme. Varasdin to take offence, but she only laughed.

"You like a man who sits in a prison one year and buys a palace the next," said M. Varasdin.

"I like a man who can get into a palace after a prison," said his wife. "You want brains and energy to do that."

Something in her tone and glance made her husband wince and then bluster.

"Gregorio is a rogue," he shouted; "Gregorio made all his money out of that Coal Syndicate, and it was one of the biggest frauds. He has ruined thousands."

"And we're all going to dance at his daughter's wedding to-morrow," piped Mr Newby. "I suppose he'll have good champagne."

"I taught him how to play ping-pong the other day," said Amabel. "He didn't like picking up the balls; he is so fat. He is always very kind, and when Jeanne Gregorio spilt her wine on the governess's dress I saw him give her a hundred-franc note for a new one. Mrs Hunter was highly respectable, and I never had enough to eat in her house, and she nagged from morning till night. It seems that swindlers are agreeable people to live with."

"Quite," said Mr Newby, "as long as you drink their champagne and pocket their bank-notes and don't trust them with a penny. If that governess saved all her life for her old age, and put her savings into his hands, he'd foist some of his rotten stuff on her without a pang, and to-morrow she'd be in the workhouse, and he'd be giving a party, and you and I would be drinking his champagne. That's how it's done, Miss Ferrers. Be Gregorio, or be you or me, but

don't be some poor devil who starves and scrapes and ends in the gutter after all."

"People are not forced to speculate; they are so greedy," said M. Varasdin.

"Oh! of course, the lamb should keep away from the wolf," said Mr Newby.

"After all, the *raison d'être* of a lamb is to be eaten," said Mme. Varasdin. "You like it yourself for dinner."

Later on in the evening, when Mr Newby had departed, the husband and wife still sat together on the balcony. It was a most unusual thing for them to do.

"I've had the devil's luck lately," began the man.

"That's nothing new," said the lady.

"There must be a smash soon."

"That's why I made a bid for the pearls."

"What will they be worth if you get them? I want thousands. The moment I touch anything it comes to grief. The moment I take my hands off it prospers. I tell you I've the devil's luck."

"I'm sure I had when I married you," said Anastasie.

"It's your extravagance that brings us to ruin," said Hyacinth.

"I want money and I mean to have it," said his wife. "I'd rather be dead than poor. People who can't make money out of a world full of imbeciles deserve all the kicks they get. It is the one thing worth doing, and if I were a man I would do it or go out. What is the use of health or beauty or brains except as a means to money? Life without it is a martyrdom that lasts as long as life itself. I, at any rate, care for nothing else, desire nothing else. If

I were a man I would have striven for it with so single a mind, with such a fierce determination, that I tell you I would have got it. No obstacles should have hindered me; I would have thrust them aside. No difficulties should have baffled me; I would have mastered them. How can a man be so indolent, so dull, so poor in spirit? You have no money? Go out into the market-place and make some, fool. You play the poorest part of all—you wolf—who never brings home his lamb."

"Oh! you have a tongue," said M. Varasdin; "I never denied that."

Then he got out a pencil and a pocket-book, and did little sums, and he got more and more excited and unhappy, and at last he dashed them both to the ground and said he could not stand this state of things any longer, and that unless Anastasie came to his assistance he would go straight downstairs and throw himself into the Seine.

"What do you expect me to do?" said Anastasie.

"Get hold of money—somehow—anyhow."

"If you would be obliging enough to throw yourself into the Seine, I might marry Mr Newby. The stupid young man is rich."

"I'm not going to drown myself to please you," said M. Varasdin.

"I am convinced you will not drown yourself. It would take a little courage and perhaps be unpleasant."

"Some day I shall kill you," snarled the man.

Mme. Varasdin got up.

"I have often thought one of us would be better out of the way," she said.

But next day, a basket of roses arrived for her, and amongst the roses there was a jeweller's case, and in the case there was a string of pearls and Mr Newby's card. She held them up triumphantly.

"You may give me another string whenever you like," she said to Hyacinth.

"Mr Newby is very gallant," he observed, and Amabel, who was present, looked in vain for any trace of embarrassment in his manner or in his wife's. They were well satisfied. At night, when she went to the Gregorios', Mme. Varasdin wore the pearls round her neck, and the eyes of every woman in the room followed her with longing. The type of woman gathered there would rather have pearls than love or honour or renown.

"If you have the wits of a sparrow you'll make money out of this," she said to her husband. "Everyone will think you've given them to me. Pearls mean money, and money means credit."

"No one will think I have given them to you," growled M. Varasdin. "Haven't you come here with that English booby at your heels?"

"But, my dear, you are dull beyond understanding. Isn't Miss Ferrers at my heels, too, and isn't she the prettiest girl in the room?"

"I may be dull," said M. Varasdin, "but I'm sharp enough to see the fellow can't keep his eyes off you. He's too raw and silly to care about a beautiful girl."

With this back-hander the exasperated gentleman sheered off, and the moment he did so Mr Newby deserted Amabel for the lady of riper years and more subtle charm. He sat down beside Mme. Varasdin, and looked through his single eyeglass at the splendid

rooms and at the people moving about in them, and when they were unusually odd he asked her to explain them. Sometimes he made a remark that surprised her by its shrewdness, but she found his conversation on the whole extremely dull.

Like most Continentals, she failed entirely to understand a man of Mr Newby's type, a type so common at home that every playing-field is full of it, and every battle is fought by it, and every ship manned by it. He was one of the swarm of clean-shaven, clean-minded English boys, with brains that never dazzle and never collapse, and a character that will neither tell lies nor forgive them. Even his civilisation was of a kind she could not discover or appreciate. She saw that he was awkward and tongue-tied, and she did not understand why he called Egon Rosenmeyer a bounder. She thought Egon Rosenmeyer charming. He had curly hair and an impudent tongue, his anecdotes had to be whispered, he was a facile musician; and as for his *bonnes fortunes*, they were like the waves of the sea, countless and overlapping. He was always ready to tell her about them, too, and she wished he would sit beside her instead of Mr Newby.

"There's that little beast of a Rosenmeyer getting introduced to Miss Ferrers," said Mr Newby. "How sick she'll be!"

"Go and rescue her, then, and send Egon to me. I like him."

"How can anyone like him?"

"What's wrong with him?" asked Mme. Varasdin.

But to explain that was, of course, beyond Mr Newby's powers.

"A man should have some muscle," he said.

Mme. Varasdin's eyes fixed themselves on Mr Newby's large, sunburnt hand. He had taken one glove off and wore the other.

"He should if he wants to be a railway porter and shoulder trunks, or a drayman and roll about barrels of beer," she said. "I don't know what use muscles are to you and M. Rosenmeyer, or what ornament. It is a superstition Europe does not share with you. Nowadays, even a war is waged with brains—a successful war, that is; you will find it out some day when you are face to face with a civilised people."

"H—m," said Mr Newby. He did not get up, because he saw that Amabel was coming towards them with her new cavalier in tow. Her face and figure and air were all English; her clothes and her coiffure were all French; and so she was, as Mme. Varasdin had said, the prettiest girl in the room.

"What do you think M. Rosenmeyer has just told me?" she said. "Mexican Jem is coming here to-night."

"How have the Gregorios managed that?" said Mme. Varasdin.

"I'm surprised myself," said M. Rosenmeyer. "Old Gregorio told me the moment I arrived. He keeps running to the stairs and watching for him. If he was expecting a royal duke he could not be in a greater fuss."

"If a royal duke came here it would be to borrow money," said Mme. Varasdin. "If Mexican Jem only looks your way you make it. He is a more

important guest to old Gregorio than any duke could be."

"But who is Mexican Jem?" asked Amabel.

"A financial power," said M. Rosenmeyer.

"But if he is English, how is it these foreigners know him?"

"The whole world knows him since he brought out the great El Paso Mine," said Mr Newby.

"Is he very rich?" asked Mme. Varasdin.

"If I had a year of his income I'd never do a day's work again," said M. Rosenmeyer.

"He's an awfully decent chap, too," said Mr Newby. "As straight as they make 'em."

"Oh! do you believe that of anybody?" said M. Rosenmeyer, who understood the English idiom. "I myself am strictly honourable, but I never expect to find other people so."

"H—m," said Mr Newby again, and M. Rosenmeyer had no notion that the inarticulate English lad had taken his measure.

"I think Mexican Jem must have come," said Amabel. "There's a buzz near that further door."

"I see him," said Mr Newby. "He has just come into the room with Mme. Gregorio."

"They crowd round him so," complained Mme. Varasdin, "anyone would think he was going to throw them shares to scramble for."

She got up and went towards the centre of the room, followed by Amabel and the two young men. They made a little separate group as the host and hostess, accompanied by a tall, distinguished-looking man, steered their way. Amabel's eyes were uncertain and astonished, and she turned to Mr Newby.

"Do you mean that tall, fair man?" she said. "He has just been stopped by someone."

"That's him," said Mr Newby.

"That Mexican Jem!" cried Amabel, and her voice carried a little further than it should have done. The gentleman looked straight at her and smiled.

"Why, he knows you," said Mme. Varasdin. "He is coming to us. You must present him to me."

VII

"Of course he knows me," said Amabel. "It is Mr Sheringham. I never heard him called Mexican Jem."

"Then you didn't keep company with the Stock Exchange," said Mr Newby, and the next moment he and Amabel were shaking hands with the guest of the evening. Mme. Varasdin edged herself a little in front of Amabel as soon as she could, and set herself to capture Mr Sheringham. She could not distinguish between simple and simpleton, and she expected to play with the three people born under the Union Jack as a juggler plays with balls, throwing one away to catch the other and yet keeping them all in hand. Large as her experience was of men, she had never come across one yet whose directness was the very weapon with which he turned her subtleties, and whose strength against her lay partly in his want of taste for the exotic. The impression she made on Mr Sheringham was of a tall, thin woman, who had eyes like a Jap and such a fidgety way with her hands that she pulled at her handkerchief while she talked to

him. Her gold-embroidered gown was no doubt very fine, but it was a gown that persistently got in front of Amabel, and the first moment he could he walked round it.

"Come and have an ice, Miss Ferrers," he said, and gave Amabel his arm and walked off with her.

"That's Mexican Jem," said Mr Newby. "What he wants he takes, and you can no more stop him than a pebble can stop a steam roller."

"Do fetch me an ice," said Mme. Varasdin. But when the young man came back with it he could not find her. He stood about for a time and felt rather bored and then he went away. He knew when he bought the pearls that he was playing the fool, and to-night he knew it with still greater conviction. The lady did not care a straw for him, and all her lures were spread for his money. He thought the game would soon come to an end. It had been amusing, costly, and instructive, and he was beginning to tire of it. He detested the husband, and his admiration of the wife was not the admiration of esteem ; it was not even the tolerant, half-contemptuous admiration men feel for the sinner who is her own enemy and no one else's. The boy had been fascinated and was coming to his senses.

Meanwhile Mme. Varasdin sat in a corner of the balcony with Egon Rosenmeyer and told him how badly Mr Newby bored her. The balcony was furnished with palms and wicker chairs, and lighted with Chinese lanterns that were bobbing in the breeze ; and Mme. Varasdin herself, with her narrow eyes and clinging gown, looked like one of the ivory-headed ladies on the fan she had just unfurled.

"He is as dull and heavy as his national food," she said, "and the girl is as excellent and insipid. Between the two I am having a time. Oh! I assure you it is not gay at home now. What a race! And it is always they who have the money."

"If you want money you should make eyes at the other one," said M. Rosenmeyer. "What became of him?"

"He walked away with mademoiselle," said Mme. Varasdin. "But they are astounding, these ladies and gentlemen. Their tongues are spiritless, their manners are rude, their flirtations are scandalous. Yet to all the world they give themselves airs."

"Let us talk of something agreeable," said M. Rosenmeyer. "Have you heard Yvette's last song?"

Sheringham had taken Amabel to the further end of the balcony which ran along two sides of the corner house in which the Gregorios lived. He fetched her an ice and some champagne, and then he sat down and looked at her.

"What has happened to you?" he said. "Do you remember the last time we met—in Mrs Hunter's drawing-room—you said you were going to Eastbourne next day—and I said I would run down there too. I never did. I was detained by business."

"I know," said Amabel sedately. "You were banging the market."

"What?" said Sheringham.

Amabel took the train of her white satin gown out of danger.

"You nearly upset that champagne," she said.

"No wonder. What do you know about markets?"

"Nothing at all. But when my uncle went off in a hurry to Mexico——"

"Your uncle?"

"Uncle Michael."

"Michael Ferrers! 'Eugenia' Ferrers! Is he your uncle? Then that explains the cook."

"The cook! Oh! do you mean Mrs Pugsley?"

"I daresay I do," said Sheringham. "I made her acquaintance last Sunday. I wanted to see you again, and, as it was the only way open to me, I dropped in to lunch at Bayswater Square. I expected to meet you at lunch, of course; but when we went down, there sat all those pasty-faced children and a pasty-faced old dragon with them."

"Mrs Hunter sent me out of the house," said Amabel.

"So I was given to understand, when I made inquiries after lunch."

"Did she say I was horrid?"

"What she said is of no importance. At the time it made me rather angry, and I suppose I showed it——"

"Oh!" said Amabel, with breathless interest. "Did she shrivel up?"

"Not perceptibly. Our parting was what you may call strained. She pretended not to know where you were."

"Did you ask her?"

"Of course I did."

"That would have made her angry."

"Yes," said Mr Sheringham pensively, "there were some feathers flying. The sort of feathers that do fly

in drawing-rooms, you know. I hate a row with a woman."

"Oh! did you have a row?" said Amabel. "Do tell me what happened."

"Nothing happened. I said it was downright wicked to send a girl like you adrift in London for no reason whatever, and that seemed to annoy her. I walked out of the house in a rage, and then that red-headed Buttons came tearing after me——"

"Oh! Ginger," said Amabel. "I like Ginger."

"So do I," said Mr Sheringham. "He stopped me and said, 'Would I please wait a minute and speak to the cook.' I was just asking him what the —what the message signified, when the cook herself appeared."

"She's an old dear," said Amabel. "I love her more than some fine ladies."

"I love her too," said Mr Sheringham. "We went inside the Square garden, and sat down on a bench; and she said she hoped she wasn't taking a liberty, but she thought I might like to know as Miss Ferrers was gone to live in Paris with an uncle as was a millionaire. We were more than half an hour together, and had a most interesting conversation. She told me ever so many things I wanted to know."

"What sort of things?"

"Oh! little things—about you—and your career as a governess to five pasty-faced children—and why she took to you from the first moment she ever set eyes on you—and how the cloak she was wearing came from you—and that you were living with some people called Varasdin, in the Avenue Ernani—and then we said good-bye—she sent you her respects—and some

day when I get married, she is coming to be my cook."

"But I don't agree to that," cried Amabel. "She is coming to live with Uncle Michael and me—when we settle down together."

"So yesterday I came to Paris and stumbled against old Gregorio first thing. I asked him if he knew the Varasdins and you—and he asked me here to meet you. That's my story. Now, what do you mean with your talk about banging markets?"

"Uncle Michael said it must be you—when he went off in a hurry—because Eugenias went down."

"It wasn't me. Of course they went down. The reef is pinched out. They're no good. Your uncle must have lost a big slice of his million over them, I'm afraid."

"I'm sorry they're no good," said Amabel, who did not feel much affected by the news of her uncle's misfortunes. The journey through life of a speculator presented itself to her mind like a switchback with violent ups and downs that the traveller took as a matter of course.

"I'm uncommonly sorry too," said Mr Sheringham.

"I have a thousand," explained Amabel. "What does 'pinched out' mean?"

"No gold. I got the news through a private source the day after I saw you, and wired from Havre to sell. But Mr Ferrers must have had the news soon after me."

"My uncle will be sorry," said Amabel. "He seemed to take such an interest in Eugenias."

"They've been very interesting lately," said Sher-

ingham. "I've dropped about a hundred thousand on them myself."

"Then M. Varasdin was right," said Amabel. "He was afraid of them."

"What sort of people are the Varasdins?"

"He is a financier, whatever that may mean," said Amabel.

"I know pretty well what it means in his case. M. Gregorio gave me a confidential sketch of his friend's career. It has been chequered and sometimes cloudy. I was thinking of the husband and wife together and of their relation to you. How did your uncle come to place you with them?"

Amabel explained, and said that she was not uncomfortable.

"The lady wears very fine pearls," said Sheringham.

"Oh! Mr Newby gave her those," said Amabel.

Mr Sheringham looked thoughtful.

"I want to come and see you," he said. "Are you having much fun? Do these people show you Paris?"

"We go to theatres and cafés. We never do the things I am dying to do."

"What are you dying to do?"

"I want to go to St Germain in a steam tram and gather lilies of the valley and Solomon's Seal in the forest. Jeanne Gregorio went with her governess the other day. She says it was like a journey in a dream. You fly along the road opposite people you have never seen, past villages and a winding river, and trees and fields. There are lovely colours and effects of light and water, she says, and then you arrive at a palace and a forest, and the forest is full of flowers. Jeanne Gregorio enjoys her life very much. Yester-

day she went up the Seine in a penny boat as far as the Jardin des Plantes. She says she had never known before how beautiful Paris was."

"We might do that any day," said Mr Sheringham, and he suggested that they should find Madame Varasdin and make a plan for to-morrow. So they got up and walked along the balcony and came upon the lady still sitting with M. Rosenmeyer. She accepted Mr Sheringham's invitation to lunch, and managed with considerable skill to engage his attention and to exclude the others. Egon Rosenmeyer understood at once that he was ousted, and went back to the salon. Amabel soon began to think she had better go back too. She felt in the way. She sat behind Mme. Varasdin and could only see Mr Sheringham over the lady's shoulder and fan, and she could not join in their talk because it was in French and all about a new farce she had not seen. Besides, Mme. Varasdin did not give her a chance. Presently the strains of Jeanne Gregorio's violin floated towards her from inside the house and she got up. But as she reached the window she came into collision with M. Varasdin, who rushed on to the balcony with a newspaper in his hand.

"Look! Look!" he cried excitedly to his wife. "My luck! my usual luck! or is it a lie? or was the bad news a lie? Is the whole thing a swindle, or am I a fool?"

"Since you ask me—you are probably a fool," said Mme. Varasdin, taking the paper from her husband's trembling hand and trying to read it by the light of the nearest lantern. M. Varasdin turned to Amabel.

"It is you who are lucky if it is true," he shrieked,

and the idea seemed to give him more pain than pleasure.

"What has happened?" said Amabel.

"You hold Eugenias, don't you—a thousand Eugenias? A new reef has been struck—it is a big strike—they'll go up—the devil knows where they'll go—I should have made my fortune——"

He stopped because his anger and excitement were literally choking him. He tumbled into a chair, breathing hard, still muttering to himself, demoralised and helpless. The paper fluttered from Mme. Varasdin's hands. She was hard hit too. Mr Sheringham picked it up.

"May I see?" he said.

"Does it affect you?" said Amabel, watching him.

"I am in the same boat as this gentleman," he said, with a glance at M. Varasdin's huddled figure. "I had my chance and lost it. I sold when there was a slump."

"Oh! but there is an important difference between you and this gentleman," said Mme. Varasdin bitterly. "In your affairs the matter is probably a trifle."

VIII

Amabel did not like M. Varasdin, because he had a florid manner and a deceitful tongue, yet she sometimes pitied him. He cringed before his bland, masterful wife, and, in spite of his smiles and his flattering speeches, he had the look of a miserable man. Mme. Varasdin had hardly spoken to him as they drove home from the Gregorios', and her tone when she did was so slighting that Amabel marvelled at his endur-

ance. She left them as soon as she could and went to bed, wishing she was not so lonely. Her mind was busy, her thoughts were dancing; when she looked at the glass her face astonished her. It had changed as a hill does when the sunlight suddenly falls there, and she felt so happy and so wide awake that she walked to and fro in her room and talked to the dream-sister she had wished for in many a sad hour and missed now when sorrow and poverty were left behind. The imaginary sister had always been a person of sense, however; had often kept up her courage; had sometimes convinced her that she was a fool, and to-night advised her to go to bed and to sleep as swiftly as she could. "Joy cometh in the morning," said the sister; and Amabel laughed as she shut her eyes.

Meanwhile the Varasdins had gone into the dining-room and turned on the light. The man brought a bottle of syrup and a syphon of soda-water from the sideboard, and mixed a glass for his wife. He lit a cigarette for himself, and filled a liqueur glass with brandy. He did not sit down, but moved about the room in a sort of sulky silence, both defiant and afraid.

"If it was possible for you to speak without lying, I should like to know how much money you *have* got," began Anastasie, when she, too, had brooded in angry quiet over the grievance in her mind.

"I tell you I am ruined," said her husband. "Perhaps you will believe it when you see the chairs and tables sold."

He waited a moment to watch the effect of this admission, before he added: "And your jewels, my dear, they will be sold too."

But he might as well have watched a mask as his wife's face when she did not wish it to tell him anything. The contempt and anger she took no pains to hide gave him no fresh clue to any move she proposed to make in their present perilous position.

"What does this news mean exactly?" she said. "Suppose you held Eugenias?"

The man put his hands to his temples with a gesture of despair. There were lines of anger in his forehead that terribly debased his face, and his wife turned her eyes from him. She did not fear his impotent display of wrath, but it was an ugly spectacle.

"I ought to have had five thousand," he said. "I could cut my throat when I think of it."

"What will five thousand shares be worth in a week's time?"

"Don't ask me. I can't bear it, I tell you. If this news is true—if a great reef has been struck, the mine is what Ferrers said it was—there will be a rush—how can I tell you where they will go?—anywhere—to fifty—to a hundred—it just depends on the news. And I'm cleaned out. I could have paid for five thousand Eugenias when Ferrers was here; I have been dealing in Americans instead—and, as usual, a panic came. They have had my last franc—I'm cleaned out."

"Well," said Anastasie, "what do you mean to do?"

"What is there to do? What can a man do without money. I *must* have money," said M. Varasdin, and he brought down his clenched hand on the table so heavily that the glasses clattered.

"Oh! don't bluster when we're by ourselves,"

said Anastasie. "You have neither sense nor spirit, and breaking glass won't persuade me of the contrary. We have been married fourteen weary years. I ought to know you."

"I can't for the life of me see what *you* do, except squander any money I and other men are fools enough to give you," said M. Varasdin.

"Nevertheless it is I who have the brains," said his wife. "When you are in a mess you always expect me to pull you out."

"Pull me out this time, then. I'm in pretty deep."

Mme. Varasdin began to take off her long gloves with a slow, delicate care that preserved their shape.

"Of course, I know what you mean," she said. "You want the girl's Eugenias."

"I would go to hell for them," said Hyacinth Louis.

"They are in her purse."

"How can I get hold of her purse?"

"You wish me to do that, of course. It is not easy. Besides—if we had them—would it be safe to sell them?"

"As safe as changing a bank-note. I should go to Buda-Pesth and sell them through Uncle Joseph. He is always willing to help a man over a difficulty. I should give him a commission, and the money would be in the family. He has a great deal of family feeling."

"You never see either a danger or a mistake until it has you in its clutch," said Anastasie. "You were born a bungler. If we get these shares I shall take them to Uncle Joseph myself. Last time I saw him he said: 'My girl, you may help Hyacinth on his

feet twenty times over and he will always return to the gutter. He is a *Schlemihl.* It is trouble thrown away to help a *Schlemihl.*"

"Get the shares, and you may call me any names you please," said M. Varasdin. "We will sell them and settle down in a good climate and live easily and sleep softly. That is all I ask. I'm sick of work and struggle and failure."

"So am I," said his wife grimly.

"You will do it, then?"

"Is there anything else to do?"

The man shrank from the hatred and anger in his wife's low voice, and after she had gone he drank some more brandy and lit a fresh cigar and took up the evening paper again. But the paper contained nothing that could lead his thoughts from his own misfortunes. Except the one with theft in front of it he could not see a loophole through which he could crawl towards better days; and hitherto his thefts had not been of this kind. An unscrupulous financier brings more misery on people than any burglar can, but society has not consented yet to class them together. Varasdin had lived on the knave's borderland, sliding downhill on the whole, and yet with his eyes on the region where men walk safely, though they bear a dishonoured name. He desired to be a flourishing rogue and not to sit in gaol again, where a man of his stomach suffers torture. Yet, think as he might, he could see no way but the one to prosperity, and all of a sudden further suspense and patience grew intolerable. With the weak man's longing for immediate action, even if it is untimely action, he threw down his paper, and, cigar in hand,

marched straight into his wife's room. She had put on a thin white wrapper and was reading a novel, and she looked up with a scowl as her husband opened the door.

"I've been thinking it over," he said. "We must get those Eugenias, and the sooner it's done the better."

"Well—get them, then," said his wife.

"You know I can't."

"Yes, I know."

"How will you set about it?"

"As I set about other things—when I see some hope of success."

"Why can't you go into her room and take them? She is probably asleep."

"How like you, to be satisfied with probability in such a case!"

"I shall have to get them myself."

"I am not anxious for the job," said Anastasie, and she rose and came towards the door with the intention, he surmised, of shutting him out of the room. But he came further into it.

"You are sure you understand?" he said. "I owe money all round. I don't possess a hundred francs. If something isn't done to help me at once I'm a ruined man."

"You told me all this five minutes ago," said Mme. Varasdin. "I suppose that even if you are ruined I may brush my hair."

"We shall go under," he said, throwing out his hands. "We may go and beg in the streets if something isn't done. And you sit here and brush your hair with silver brushes. Do you know what ruin

means? Do you know what cold and hunger are and the shame of rags?"

"I have known, thanks to you. I shall know again if I trust to you."

It seemed from their glances as if this man and woman had reached the last extremity of hate and distress; and yet to the man at least separation did not suggest itself with any promise of relief. His wife's dislike and contempt goaded him to fury, but there was no one else in the world who could help him—and he had no idea of helping himself.

"If you sold your pearls it would be something," he said sullenly.

"I am not going to sell my pearls yet," she said. "When I do I shall keep the money. I shall not throw it out of the window—or give it to you. Will you be good enough to go now. It is two o'clock, and I have a long day before me."

"What have you to do?"

"I take Miss Ferrers to Paillard's to lunch with Mr Sheringham. We are to do something absurd in the afternoon, something with a steamboat and the Jardin des Plantes, I believe. We shall be together all day, and in the evening the gentlemen will probably dine here."

"Together—all—day," said M. Varasdin with a quiver in his voice, and he went quietly out of the room. His wife listened to his step in the corridor and heard him shut his door and lock it. Then she went to bed herself and was soon asleep.

Next day she took great pains with her toilet, but she found when she arrived at Paillard's that it was trouble thrown away. Mr Sheringham only had eyes

for Amabel, who wore a white serge coat and skirt made by an English tailor, and a white straw hat. He had invited Mr Newby to make a fourth, and even he looked again and again at Amabel, and said in an undertone to Mme. Varasdin, that if ever you did see a really pretty girl in Paris you only had to hear her speak to discover she was English or American.

"It is an acquired taste," said Anastasie. "Over here we don't admire your solid, red-faced dairymaids. Our beauties have grace and delicacy and charm."

Mr Newby replied with one of those little grunts that are the inexpressive Englishman's favourite form of dissent. He perceived that Amabel's cheeks were not red, nor was her figure solid, but it did not seem worth while to say so to Mme. Varasdin. He began to talk about oysters instead. After lunch they took two little open carriages and drove to the Jardin des Plantes.

"We will come back by steamboat," said Mr Sheringham to Amabel when they had started. "We have the whole afternoon and evening before us. I am going to dine with you too; Mme. Varasdin has asked me. It sounds ungrateful, but I don't like Mme. Varasdin or her husband either. I have accepted because I want to see you and see how the land lies. I am not sure yet whether I shall have to go back early or late to-morrow. Why don't you come back too?"

"Oh, why should I?" said Amabel. "Uncle Michael expects to find me in Paris. We are going to set up house together in New York."

"That sort of plan doesn't always come off," said Mr Sheringham.

" It's a very pleasant plan.

" I can imagine a still pleasanter one," said Mr Sheringham.

Amabel did not ask him to describe it. His voice, his eyes, his manner were all eloquent of the desire in his heart; and in a man's way, without actual confession, he had been telling her ever since they met that he loved her. Her thoughts were not fixed on the city and its sights, and when they got out of the carriage at the Jardin des Plantes she was happy and preoccupied and perhaps not very wide awake. At any rate Mme. Varasdin's voice and touch, a few minutes later, seemed to rouse her out of a dream.

" The gentlemen have gone off to speak to one of the keepers," she said. " It seems that we ought to have had some sort of passes of admission. I wish you would lend me your purse a moment. I have forgotten to bring any money, and I want to go to that stall and buy some cakes for the elephants."

Amabel's eyes were on a perambulating Polar bear, deep down below her. Without looking at Mme. Varasdin she gave her the little beaded purse-bag she was carrying in her hand.

" Shall I come with you ? " she said absently.

" No," said Mme. Varasdin. " The gentlemen expect to find us here. I will be back in a moment."

IX

Mme. Varasdin had never attempted a theft requiring so much skill and effrontery. She had to extract the certificate of the shares without being seen by the woman who sold cakes or by any chance

passer-by; and, of course, when the robbery was discovered, she would have to take the line that Amabel was careless, had left her purse here and there, and had probably lost her property out of doors. She knew where to hide the slip of paper while the storm burst, and had, in fact, spent some minutes that morning over the lining of an old winter jacket that usually lay with other rubbish at the bottom of a trunk, in a lumber room at the top of the house.

Her past life contained many episodes that prepared her in some degree for the present hour. She had stolen pence at school. She was the child of shifty, thriftless parents, and her married life had always been unstable. For Amabel she had no pity, but only an envious grudge of her youth and her smiling fortunes; and she would have defrauded the girl of her last penny and her last chance without a pang. She had no room in her mind for any needs except her own, and no heart for anyone else's troubles. She would very much rather have had a rich husband than a poor one who drove her to run risks. But money she must have. She could not work; she could not deny herself; she was dainty, delicate, and selfish; one of those who encumber the earth and behave as if the earth and everything in it were made for them.

She opened the bag as she stood at the stall, and saw that it contained an inner pocket with a separate clasp; and when she undid the clasp she saw that the certificate was wedged tightly inside. It was a thick paper, folded several times, and yet rather too long for the width of the bag. There was a

handkerchief in the purse too, and Mme. Varasdin took that out and held it over the open pocket while she apparently felt for change for the cakes, and really tugged at the certificate. To find it, to hold it in her hands, and then to discover that it was jammed, was a bit of the devil's luck she had not bargained for. The woman who had sold her the cakes had wrapped them up, and waited patiently for payment. Mme. Varasdin turned away from her, stooped a little over the purse as if to look more carefully for the coins she wanted, and by dint of stretching the inner bag violently apart, at last got out the paper she wanted. Her hand closed over it, but could not quite conceal it. She hurriedly took some silver coins from the purse, kept the handerchief covering the shares for the moment, and turned towards the stall again to pay for her cakes. She meant to hide the certificate in an inside pocket of her tailor-made coat as she walked away, but she did not mean to let the stallkeeper see her doing this. What she had done, so far, had been done in a moment and unobserved, and the thought flamed within her that, by her own dexterity, she held a fortune between her fingers, a fortune that, a minute later, would be her own. She put the silver on the stall, took up the cakes and some copper change, and, as she did so, heard the creak of footsteps behind her, and then Mr Newby's voice in her ears.

" Buying nuts for the monkeys, Mme. Varasdin ? " said he, and wondered why the lady started violently and afterwards neither spoke nor moved. She stood there like a creature petrified, conscious all the while that Sheringham stood there too, and that the hand-

kerchief and the folded paper it did not wholly conceal were still in her right hand. The sudden fall from success to utter failure confounded and enraged her, but she did not lose her head. She recognised that for the moment it was failure. When she had recovered sufficiently she put the coppers, the handkerchief, and the certificate all together into the gaping mouth of the bag. Then she shut it with a snap, and showed Mr Newby a smiling face as she gave him her parcel of cakes to carry.

"Where did you get your purse?" he said, with his eyes on the bead-bag. "It is exactly like one I helped Miss Ferrers choose in the Avenue de l'Opera last week, and the man vowed he had not another."

"It is Miss Ferrers' purse," said Mme. Varasdin. "I borrowed it just now to buy the cakes. I had forgotten my own."

"She wanted a big one because she carries those shares about with her that her uncle gave her," continued Mr Newby. "I stuffed them into the inside pocket for her, and I told her at the time she would never get them out unless she tore the purse; but she won't want to get them out till he tells her to sell, and then the price of the purse won't matter. What are Eugenias doing to-day, Sheringham? That strike had much effect yet?"

"Sent them up to three already," said Mr Sheringham.

"Wish I had a few," said Mr Newby.

Mr Sheringham did not show much interest in the sensational rise of Eugenias. He was watching Mme. Varasdin. He had seen her start when they came up to her; he had seen the paper and the handkerchief

in her hand, and he had seen her return both to the bag. His curiosity was aroused, and he had made up his mind to ask Amabel whether she had taken the certificate out of the inside pocket of the purse, and whether the purse was torn. Madame Varasdin, however, forestalled him.

"But there is a thick-folded paper in the purse," she said. "I got it out with the handkerchief just now when I wanted some small coins. It was not in the inside pocket."

"Bai Jove," said Mr Newby, "Miss Ferrers must have been playing with her Eugenias. Isn't the purse torn?"

Madame Varasdin just undid the clasp and snapped it to again.

"I think it is, a little," she said. "But I hate opening anyone else's purse, don't you? It makes one feel as if one was reading a letter meant for somebody else."

"I never tried that," said Mr Newby lightly.

"I wonder why Miss Ferrers carries these shares about with her in this way?" said Sheringham. "A purse is easily lost."

"Of course it is," said Mme. Varasdin. "Miss Ferrers is most careless. I have often seen this one lying about. We have honest servants just at present; I believe, but my cook is leaving——"

"I don't think servants would steal shares," said Mr Newby.

"She might drop them anywhere—in a shop when she takes them out with her handkerchief—as I did just now. I have begged her to be more careful, but she pays no attention to me. She sees that

Hyacinth carries papers of importance in his pocket-book, and I suppose she thinks it is a safe thing to do."

"She usually wears this purse hanging from her waistband," said Mr Newby. "That's safe enough —if she had left the certificate where I put it. I wonder why she was carrying the bag loose to-day?"

"Because she is wearing a blouse that does not admit of a waistband," explained Mme. Varasdin. "You should have chosen a purse with a chatelaine hook. That can be worn with anything."

"We thought a ring safer than a hook," said Mr Newby.

While they talked they approached the bear-pit again, and Amabel saw them and came their way.

"But you have not bought many cakes," she said, with a disappointed air, when she saw the little parcel in Mr Newby's hand.

"Mme. Varasdin is responsible," said he. "We met at the cake-stall."

"Come and get some more," said Sheringham, addressing Amabel.

"Yes," said Mme. Varasdin; "let us all go and buy some more and give the poor animals a feast. I adore animals. They are greedy and suspicious without being ashamed of it. We are just as bad as they are really, but we make greater pretensions—the morality of men lies chiefly on their lips."

"Suspicion is not always a vice," said Sheringham.

"It is always an unamiable trait," said Mme. Varasdin.

"Then how would you catch your criminals?" asked Mr Newby.

"There would be no criminals if society were less corrupt," said Mme. Varasdin.

"Meanwhile, a police force is useful," said Sheringham; and then they arrived at the stall and he bought more cakes and paid for them. As they went away from it again, Mme. Varasdin returned Amabel's purse.

"Don't let me forget that I owe you a franc," she said.

As a matter of fact, she owed Amabel a good deal. The seven guineas a week the girl paid regularly for board and lodging did not pay all the expenses of the flat, and it was a long time since Hyacinth Louis had had a balance at the bank. Mme. Varasdin often borrowed money from her guest, and hitherto Amabel had lent it without protest. Money had come into her hands so suddenly and unexpectedly that for the time being she had grown careless and let it slip anyhow through her fingers. But she was beginning to see that loans to her present host and hostess were like water poured through a sieve. She wished her uncle would come back and put an end to the connection for her, and she often wished she had never occupied the room with the crimson satin chairs. The Varasdins were, of course, as civil as self-interest demanded, and the food was good and the flat in a pleasant quarter; but all these advantages did not make up for a sense of insecurity that she could not shake off. Only this morning, something had happened to heighten it.

Anyone who has to do with Continental servants knows, of course, that they are not as determined as British servants to treat the relationship between

employer and employed from a purely business point of view. They are inclined to be friendly and loquacious, to take your interest in their affairs for granted, and if they like you or admire you, to say so without beating about the bush. Before Amabel had been a week in the Avenue Ernani she knew that the Alsatian cook supported an aged mother, and that she was engaged to a railway guard who had a hot temper but a good heart; and that Adèle, the *femme-de-chambre*, had been very unlucky in her situations, and had remarked the day Amabel arrived that mademoiselle had a sweet nature and would, doubtless, be easy to please. The cook used to bring Amabel a little bunch of flowers every day, and the *femme-de-chambre* used to help her to dress, and both girls would have gossiped about the Varasdins if Amabel had not stopped them from the first. But this morning the cook had come to her in a state of angry excitement and poured forth her tale. Amabel did not find angry Alsatian-French easy to follow, but she made out that the cook was leaving for Alsace to-morrow because her mother was ill, and that she could not get her wages out of the Varasdins. Bandits she called them, amongst other things, and in a voluble patois she advised Amabel not to remain with such people. When Amabel gave her enough money for her journey, she shed tears and kissed the girl's hand and implored her to leave the house.

"It is not a house for you," she said plainly; and Adèle, who was present, nodded mysteriously, and said that she herself did not mean to stay much longer, whether she got paid or not.

"Some day it will be ph—tt!" she said, and her

dramatic gesture described an explosion and the wreck it leaves behind.

Amabel's growing uneasiness was not set at rest by these remarks, but it did not occur to her that there was any need for hurry. Financial difficulties do not, as a rule, drive you out of the house at an hour's notice, like an infectious disease. She resolved, however, to talk to Mr Sheringham about the choice before her of finding different quarters in Paris and returning to England. He was not an old, tried friend, but she had made up her mind that he was a friend, and that the wide world did not hold his match in kindness, strength, and wisdom. In her own mind she likened him to the golden Sigurd, whose eyes were so awful to his enemies and so kind to children, to the poor, and to the women who loved him; and as she walked round the elephant-house with the astute financier she tried to fancy what he would look like in a helmet and armour of gold. She thought they would become him, and puzzled him considerably by showing a sudden, ardent, and irrelevant interest in the fancy balls he had attended and the costumes he had chosen.

"I went as a clown once, when I was about eighteen," he remembered with some difficulty.

"Oh!" said Amabel, profoundly shocked. "How unsuitable!"

"I wonder you think so," said Mr Sheringham. "You must have forgotten our first meeting."

That was so far from the truth that Amabel coloured and did not speak. They were standing in front of an engaging giant elephant with an appetite for cakes. They had been standing there for some time. Mme. Varasdin and Mr Newby had disappeared.

"Do you remember our first meeting?" said Mr Sheringham.

"It was on Florrie Hunter's birthday, when she had a children's party."

"It was in the dining-room. Miss Hunter invited me to pull a cracker—a very stiff one—I gave a sort of backward jerk over it, and nearly upset someone behind me who had a dish in her hands."

"You did upset the custards. Mrs Hunter called me clumsy and apologised to you."

"You cried."

"No, never!"

"I swear I saw tears in your eyes."

"That's not crying."

"And all the rest of the evening I tried to get near you——"

"Yes," said Amabel, with a reminiscent sigh; "I know you did."

"You suddenly disappeared."

"Mrs Hunter told me to go upstairs and stay there."

"Did you cry when you were upstairs?"

"The elephant is asking for another cake," said Amabel. "Let us talk about elephants and not about tears. If I did cry I am ashamed of it. I wish I had more courage. I wish I was not afraid of people. I suppose if you know your quarrel is just you do not shrink from it. I do; and I hate myself for it."

"How many people are you afraid of, and how many quarrels have you on your hands?" asked Mr Sheringham.

"You should have gone as a knight," exclaimed

Amabel, who was watching his eyes, and she laughed at his momentary want of comprehension. "Where are the others?" she said.

"But you don't answer my questions," said he.

They walked right round the elephant-house, and did not see the others. Then they went out into the gardens and did not find them there.

"I know what has happened," said Amabel. "Mme. Varasdin has driven home. She told me nothing would induce her to travel on a penny steamboat; and I saw her shudder and open a smelling-bottle when we went into the elephant-house. I suppose she thought that, as you were to dine with her, you would not mind escorting me home. You know M. Varasdin does not dress for dinner."

"But we need not go yet," said Mr Sheringham, looking at his watch. "You said you wanted to see all the animals."

"How is it you have time? I thought people like you and Uncle Michael never had time for anything but business."

"Is your uncle married?"

"No," said Amabel, thinking that her companion was irrelevant now. "He told me he had never had time to think about it."

"I should have said the same three months ago," observed Mr Sheringham.

"What happened three months ago?" asked Amabel.

"We've been over all that," said Mr Sheringham. "There was a children's party—and a stiff cracker—and upset custards—and an angry lady——"

"Oh!" said Amabel.

X

It was after five when they strolled through the gardens to the Quai d'Austerlitz and took the first steamboat that went their way. Amabel thought it was a pleasant way of seeing Paris. She sat on the clean, half-empty boat with Mr Sheringham, and steamed smoothly under the bridges of the city past the spires of many churches and the façades of many splendid buildings, in sight of the city traffic and sometimes in hearing of the city wheels. Evening lights set the city and the sky afire, and a summer breeze blew up the river from seawards and met them freshly. Mr Sheringham had led Amabel to a seat in the bows, which they had to themselves. It was a little way below the main-deck, and they were almost out of sight of other passengers and quite out of hearing. Amabel looked at the clouds and thought her own fate was as suddenly and rosily aglow as they were. She looked at the man beside her, and wondered where his eyes had been these many years, and why she out of all the women in the world should please him. She tried to discover his qualities, and she entered with wonder into the lover's land where mortals walk as gods.

It was a happy hour for both of them. Mr Sheringham had been too hard at work all his life to fritter and diffuse his affections, and he had fallen in love, as a healthy-minded man often does, with the most ardent belief and delight. His subtlety was all financial; in the human relations of life he showed himself simple and kind. "Here by God's grace is the

one maid for me," says Geraint, the first time he sets eyes on Enid, and the same thought had flashed across Sheringham's mind when he turned in a hurry and saw Amabel's scared face and the custard streaming absurdly down the worst and meanest dress in the room. Now she sat beside him fine and radiant as a lily. Without his aid Fortune had turned her wheel. But the change that meant so much to her hardly engaged his thoughts. Poor or rich, she was the one maid for him. He talked to her about his home and his people, and she told him about the loneliness and the poverty she had passed through. When words failed them, they watched the city and the sky.

" I wish I had more courage," said Amabel suddenly. " There is a disagreeable thing I ought to do, and I believe I shall just go on from day to day not doing it —unless something happens to make it easier."

" Is it a *very* disagreeable thing ? " asked Sheringham.

" I want to get away from the Varasdins."

" I'm glad to hear it. I don't like either of them."

Masculine approval is always bracing and pleasant to the feminine mind, especially when the encouraging man happens also to be the only man in the world of any importance.

" It is so difficult to tell Mme. Varasdin," Amabel went on. " Besides, it does seem unkind to leave them just when my money is so necessary to them. If M. Varasdin began to prosper again, I should not hesitate. You know about business matters, Mr Sheringham. Is he ever likely to get on ? "

" You can never say with a man like that."

" Couldn't you put him in the way of things ? "

"I would rather not have any dealings with him."

"Well—I hope Uncle Michael will soon come back. I am glad you are not operating against him, as he thought. I wrote to him this morning and told him you had lost a hundred thousand over Eugenias, and that you were very pleased for his sake to hear about the new reef."

"Oh! Did you?" said Sheringham.

"Yes," said Amabel. "And I asked him to send you a few shares if they went up—instead of those you sold so badly, you know."

"I don't think you can expect him to do that," said Sheringham, taken aback. "It isn't usual."

"I am sure Uncle Michael would like to," continued Amabel. "He seemed to be wrapped up in Eugenias, and it would vex him to think anyone lost over them, especially any friend of ours. He carries them about in his pocket like love-letters. He gave me a thousand. I'll show them to you."

"Yes, do," said Mr Sheringham, and he watched her open the bag. She looked as much taken aback as he expected.

"How very odd!" she said. "Someone has wrenched them out of the inner pocket, and they were in so tight—the lining is all torn and the frame twisted——"

She turned the contents of the bag into her lap and examined it. Meanwhile Mr Sheringham looked at the certificate of the shares.

"It must have been Mme. Varasdin when I lent her the purse," she went on. "She has always been rather keen about Eugenias and angry with her husband because he had none. I suppose she wanted

to look at them. But how vexatious it is! I only bought this bag a week ago, and it cost fifty francs. Such things are so dear in Paris. I'll never lend it to Mme. Varasdin again. Do you think it can be mended?"

"I daresay. But why don't you sell your shares and invest the money—not directly perhaps, but when they go higher still? And you should keep them in a safe place. You know they are bearer shares. If they were stolen you would probably never recover them."

"Stolen!" said Amabel; and he saw that he had frightened her and he repented of it. He cared very little whether she came to him with a thousand Eugenias in her hand or with never a penny. The important thing was that she should come.

"Oh, well!" he said, "I can't see why you should carry them about."

"Uncle Michael told me to keep them till he wired and then to sell them at once. But he was in such a hurry, he never told me where to sell them—at least he said something about a respectable stockbroker—somehow I don't like the idea of M. Varasdin."

"I'm a stockbroker, you know," said Sheringham.

"Oh, thank you!" said Amabel. "Then the moment Uncle Michael wires, I'll post this paper to you."

"You may do that," said Sheringham, "but you should also wire your uncle's instructions. Then I shall know what to do."

He wished she would give the certificate into his charge at once; but just then the collector came round for fares, and when he had gone again Amabel

put her loose money and her Eugenias back into the bag. She called Mr Sheringham's attention to the bridge they were approaching—their talk shifted, and the opportunity passed by. His suspicions were so vague, and his uneasiness so undetermined, that he was inclined to wait rather than to alarm her seriously. He had seen the shares in Mme. Varasdin's hands, but the very audacity of her attempt baffled him. Amabel would have missed the shares by this time ; she must have raised a hue and cry ; what would the lady who borrowed the purse have said in her own defence ? Sheringham saw in a flash how little she would need to say as long as the shares were not found in her possession or their sale traced to her.

" I hope you will soon come back to England," he said to Amabel ; and that was all the outcome just at present of his train of thought.

When they got back to the flat, Mme. Varasdin sat on the balcony in a poppy-red gown. She had twisted Mr Newby's pearls round her throat, and she wore other pearls in her hair, and for the time being she had got rid of Mr Newby. She entertained Sheringham while Amabel changed her gown, and when the girl came back it seemed as if the witch had bewitched him. Anyhow, until the other men arrived, she held his attention, paid him brazen court, and let Amabel sit silent and neglected. The girl, unversed in the ways of men, was puzzled by his temporary capture ; and, after dinner, when Mme. Varasdin went back to her seat on the balcony and invited the three men to follow her, Amabel stayed behind in the salon. She opened the piano, and began to play softly to herself, without music and without lights.

Voices and laughter reached her from outside, and, through an open window, she could just see a scarlet sleeve whenever Mme. Varasdin lifted her cigarette to her lips. All through dinner the lady had led the talk and turned it, while the men responded and were entertained. With the best will in the world, Amabel could not take her part, and by the end of the meal her silence had become a little dejected. Once or twice Mr Sheringham had looked across the table at her inquiringly, as if he saw that something was the matter and wondered what; but his hostess always managed to divert his attention. As a friend for Amabel he did not change his opinion of Mme. Varasdin, but he began to understand why young gentlemen presented her with pearls. Her way of telling gay French stories in a low voice, and with a serene brow, was just what would make a young gentleman feel that he was really seeing life. At one moment Mr Newby had been so well amused that he was obliged to giggle. M. Varasdin sat at his own table with the air of a lay figure that smiles whatever face you show it, and smiles without joy or understanding.

While Amabel played, it grew so dark that she could hardly distinguish the notes of the piano, or the furniture in the room; yet her heart gave a leap of hope and delight as she heard someone come slowly towards her. She could just make out that it was Mr Sheringham. He sat down beside her, while she finished an adagio from a Beethoven Sonata.

"Why do you stay in here by yourself?" he said. "Don't you like the balcony?"

"Is it pleasanter out there?"

"It might be if you came."

"Very well," said Amabel, and she was shutting the lid of the piano when she felt an arresting touch on her arm.

"There is no hurry now," said Mr Sheringham. "Let us stay here. Why were you so silent all through dinner, and why do you sit here alone?"

"What a beautiful dress Mme. Varasdin is wearing to-night!" said Amabel. "But I think she should have worn red poppies in her hair—big, wide-open ones in a sort of crown. What a clever woman she is, and how well she entertained you all with her talk! I wish I understood French better and could follow everything she says!"

"Oh, is that it?" said Mr Sheringham. "Do you really believe, because a man looks and laughs and listens—I don't want to talk to you across a dinner table. I'm past that. Here, by ourselves, in the dark——"

He stopped short, and stared at the other end of the room, where someone moved swiftly through the darkness and turned on the light.

"We want a little music," said Mme. Varasdin.

Amabel relinquished her place at the piano without a word. The untimely interruption did not anger her as it did Sheringham. He "had the expression of *Damn* all over him." The other men came in from the balcony; the maid who had remained brought in a tray with syrup and orangeade, and Mme. Varasdin began to sing. M. Varasdin pressed his sweet drinks on the two Englishmen, and looked rather hurt because they refused them. Amabel took her glass of iced orangeade to the open window, stood there a moment, and then went out on the balcony. She

had not stood there long when Mr Sheringham joined her.

"We can't talk here," he said, still angry. "Some of them will be on us directly with their syrup and their silly songs. What business has that woman to sing such songs when you are under her roof? But I suppose you don't understand much French."

"I do," said Amabel indignantly. "I took three French prizes at school, and when I go to the Français I can follow quite well if I get the play and read it beforehand. I think French is the most beautiful language there is. I enjoy hearing the great actors as much as I enjoy music. But I can't follow all that variety slang yet. I daresay I shall soon."

"Not if I can help it," thought Sheringham; but he only said that he wanted to talk to Amabel to-morrow afternoon and come to some arrangement that would take her back to England immediately.

"To-morrow is Wednesday," said Amabel. "In the morning we often go to the Avenue des Acacias."

"I have two important appointments in the morning," said Mr Sheringham. "It would not be fair to other people to give them up. Besides, I particularly want to see you by yourself. It is no use my coming here. Will you be in the Avenue des Acacias at four o'clock?"

"I will if you can promise to be punctual," said Amabel. "I should not like to wait about long by myself. That part of the Bois is rather deserted in the afternoon."

"If you come at four you shall find me waiting for you—just at this end of the Avenue, you know," promised Mr Sheringham.

Directly he had gone Amabel went to her own room. As long as the piano was going there was no chance of sleep, but she was too happy to mind that at all. Since her parents died she had been lonely and unloved, and until lately very poor; and now, to-morrow promised what her heart desired. It hardly crossed her mind that her lover was a rich man; when it did, the idea was comfortable, and translated itself into pretty frocks and rooms and the delightful exercise of generosity, and, above all, into an emblem of her lover's qualities. She took pride in his success and power. She fell asleep thinking of him, and was half roused when Mr Newby departed, slamming the front door. Then the peace of the night came over the flat and she slept profoundly. What woke her she never knew; what time it was she could not tell. But the dawn had not risen, the stars were still blinking in the sky, when, without moving or starting, she opened her eyes. Someone had softly turned the handle of the door and was creeping across the room towards the bed.

XI

Amabel did not stir. She lay facing the open door, her eyes fixed on the dark figure of Mme. Varasdin, who came as softly as a ghost towards the bed. She came straight on without hesitation or stumbling, and yet it seemed to Amabel that she took a long while to cross the parqueted floor on which her bare feet made so little sound. The girl felt horribly afraid and inclined to start, or speak, or scream. The manner of the woman's entry and her cat-like tread were alarm-

ing, so was the dim outline of her face, set in resolve and inhuman. Amabel looked at her hands. One held her gown from the floor, one hung at her side, but it was too dark to see whether they were empty. The girl's heart beat wildly in her throat; she felt sick with fright. If she moved, the woman might fly at her; if she lay still, a mere thief might take what she came for and go away. That she came on some sinister errand was proclaimed in her face. Amabel had not drawn her thick curtains, and through the muslin ones the starlight came into the room, just breaking the darkness.

As the woman approached the bed Amabel dared not lift her eyelids in case it should be seen that she was not asleep, but she wondered her anxious breath and shivering body did not betray her. She lay as rigid as she could, but her knees were loosened and her hands were tremulous and cold. She thought she could feel the warmth of Mme. Varasdin's body as she bent over the bed and cautiously slid her hand beneath the pillow; the scent of violets seemed to fill the room. The hand groping under the pillow slowly closed on something and was withdrawn. The next moment Mme. Varasdin was gliding from the bed towards the open door. She made no attempt to close it.

Relief and terror and anger struggled together in Amabel's mind as she lay there indecisive and unhinged. It was not murder the woman was after, then, but theft: the theft of the Eugenias. With a flash Amabel saw the events of the afternoon in their real light, the request for her purse, the removal of the certificate, the arrival at the bear-pit of Mme. Varasdin and the two men, and Mr Newby's remark

that they had met at the cake-stall. Without rhyme or reason, Amabel suddenly found her fear melting fast in her hot indignation. She made no plan, she took no care, but jumped out of bed and hurried barefoot into the adjoining room. Mme. Varasdin stood close to an open window and with her back to Amabel. Her head stooped a little over her hands, but as the girl came up behind her, she raised her right arm and was just about to throw the purse into the road, when Amabel caught her wrist and saved it. Mme. Varasdin's cry of surprise had rage as well as fear in it, and for a moment Amabel wished she had not followed her. The first look in the woman's eyes was murderous, and her free hand went up towards the girl's throat. Amabel stepped back with a shudder and would have fled if Mme. Varasdin's manner had not undergone a swift, curious change. She allowed the purse and the shares to fall to the ground, pressed her uplifted hands to her temples, and said, in a voice of sleepy bewilderment—

"What has happened? Where am I?"

"You came into my room and stole my purse," said Amabel. "I suppose that paper you have just dropped is the certificate of my Eugenias."

She picked it up as she spoke and put it back in her bag, and all the while she stood there she watched Mme. Varasdin in case she should make a sudden spring and wrench it out of her hands. The lady now looked unspeakably sad and surprised. She pressed her hands to her temples again and sank into her chair with a melancholy groan.

"Terrible!" she exclaimed, "terrible!"

"It is disgraceful," said Amabel.

"I thought I was safe," said Mme. Varasdin.

"You would have been if I had not happened to wake. Someone in the street would have picked up the purse. I should have had no proof against you."

"It is a horrible affliction," said Mme. Varasdin.

"I had no idea that you were subject to it," said Amabel—"kleptomania."

"I know nothing about kleptomania. I am not sure that I believe in it. A thief is a thief whatever fine names the medical profession finds for him. I am a somnambulist. As a child I frequently walked in my sleep, and whatever I dreamed I was doing I actually did. One night I walked barefoot through my father's forest in the snow. I was ill for three months after that. Then the malady seemed to leave me, I hoped never to return. I should probably have thrown myself from the balcony if you had not roused me. Otherwise why should I be standing close to the open window? Perhaps you have saved my life."

"I am glad I have saved my Eugenias," said Amabel. The lady's defence was unanswerable at that moment and without further inquiry; and yet it was unconvincing.

"Take my advice and put them in a safer place," said Mme. Varasdin.

"I shall give them to Mr Sheringham to-morrow," said Amabel. "I wish I had done so to-day when we found they had been moved."

Mme. Varasdin's glance had neither sleep nor bewilderment in it now. Her narrow eyes closed and her mouth was set in dislike as she rose slowly from her chair.

"To-morrow has come," she said. "It must be

two o'clock. I am afraid I have curtailed your sleep. But you need not be nervous; I never walk twice in one night."

Amabel went back to her room, tried the bolts of her window and outer door, and managed to push her chest of drawers across the door opening into the salon. She made a great noise, and once when she stopped she heard a step on the other side, so she knew that Mme. Varasdin was listening. When she had barricaded herself, she got into bed again, but found she could not sleep. At every creak she started, and the silence of the streets increased her sense of loneliness and her fear. She feared the return of Mme. Varasdin; she feared husband and wife together. Suppose they made their way in and were determined to do her some horrid harm! Now that the strain was over, her courage ebbed away and she lay with wide-open eyes, expectant and terrified. What had happened seemed worse in retrospect than it had been in experience, just as a narrow escape from violent death turns one sick when all danger is gone by. She vowed she would not sleep under that roof another night, or, if she could help it, confront either of the Varasdins again; and amidst the distress and turmoil in her mind there arose the consoling thought of her friend. He would meet her, she would tell him she must get away, and he would help her. Instead of being afraid of the Varasdins as she was, he would assuredly make them afraid of him. "And that is the difference between a man and a woman," thought Amabel with the usual injustice of a woman when she is comparing her love with her sex. Directly it was light she got up and dressed and opened her window. The fresh air was restoring, and so was

the return of life in the street. The first tram-car seemed to bring back the midday world that has no traffic with nightmares; and the people who soon appeared—artisans on their way to work, milkmen, servants, shopkeepers—were all decent folk, who come with dawn and leave night and its deeds behind them. When Amabel saw that the street was really astir again, she began to pack her trunks, as she had made up her mind that she would not come back to the house if she could help it. By the time she had finished, the maid brought her a tray with coffee and bread-and-butter; and when Amabel gave her a present of money the girl looked round with surprise at the dismantled room and tried to find out what the young lady's plans were. But the young lady was not in a communicative mood, said she was going out for the day, and left a message for madame that she would not return till late in the afternoon. She said nothing about her trunks being packed ready for a journey, and when she had drunk her coffee she slipped out of the front door quietly and quickly, just as if she did not wish to be seen.

Amabel had a good many hours to get through before she could go to the Avenue des Acacias, but she had mapped out the time for herself as well as she could. She went straight to the galleries of the Louvre and spent two hours there, her thoughts perhaps fixed with greater persistence on the events of the night and the promise of the afternoon than on the masterpieces before her eyes. At one o'clock she went for lunch to a place where the British forgather, and find in the very heart of Paris that respectable and gloomy environment that reminds them of home. She sat next to a chubby curate and

opposite a thin grey spinster dressed in shrunken tweeds, a sailor hat, and spectacles. She ate ham-and-eggs, drank Mugby Junction coffee, and read the Births, Deaths, and Marriages in an old number of the *Times*. When she had been there half an hour she felt quite homesick, and determined to live amongst her countryfolk again.

But though she made the ham-and-eggs last as long as she could, she had more than two hours to get through before she could take the second step towards her return journey. She had taken a big one when she packed her trunks, and the moment she saw Mr Sheringham she meant to ask his advice as to the rest. Meanwhile she could think of nothing better to do than to drive to the Salon. There is protection in a crowd, and Amabel got so much stared at that she did not enjoy walking about the streets of Paris alone. She had been to the Salon several times already and knew where to find her favourite pictures; and she had sat down in front of one and was staring at it rather sleepily when, to her surprise, Mr Newby came up to her. He carried a catalogue in his hand and looked delighted to find a companion.

"I've had enough for to-day," he said. "It's a beastly grind. Let's come into one of those little side-galleries and talk. Wonder who buys these pictures? I wouldn't. Wonder how the fellows who paint them make a living? Just look at that heap of decaying cabbages with a Cupid sitting on top! What's it mean? Who wants to see a Cupid sitting on cabbages every day of his life? And look at those demons writhing in hell!"

"They are not demons," said Amabel, who had

got up and was looking patiently at the picture; "they are musicians in an orchestra. Their faces are blurred. Perhaps if we were not so ignorant we should think it very clever. Don't you know that the French are much better at painting and acting than we are?"

"Oh, I daresay," said Mr Newby, and the admission did not seem to trouble him. He found a comfortable seat, and began to look at the passers-by through his single eyeglass.

"How the beggars stare!" he went on. "If you were my sister, I wouldn't let you knock about Paris by yourself in this way. It's not right."

"But I'm with you now," said Amabel, laughing at the boy's tone, and secretly rather glad he was there. The rooms were full of people of various kinds, and some of the wrong kind stared at the beautiful English girl more than was civil or agreeable.

Mr Newby drew himself up and, with a further assumption of manliness, said—

"When you've had enough of the pictures I'll take you back to the Avenue Ernani."

"No, you won't," said Amabel; "I'm not going back there yet."

"Where are you going?"

"To meet a friend in the Bois."

Mr Newby's silence expressed dissatisfaction. He did not maintain it long.

"Is the friend French or English?" he asked.

"What does it matter?" said Amabel.

"It makes all the difference," said Mr Newby.

"When I was a little girl I was told not to ask questions."

"I was told not to let my small sisters get into mischief."

Amabel's eyes twinkled in a friendly way as she glanced at the young man.

"I'm going to meet Mr Sheringham," she said.

"Sheringham is an awfully decent sort," said Mr Newby.

"If he can help me arrange it, I shall return to England to-night."

"Bless me! What has happened? Have you had a row with the Varasdins?"

"I don't like Mme. Varasdin," said Amabel.

She was not unwilling to let Mr Newby know that there could be divergent opinions about the bewitching Anastasie, and it surprised her a good deal to find that he seemed to understand her point of view.

"I like her very much myself," he said; "but I like cognac, and tobacco, and baccarat, and other things I should not consider wholesome for my little sisters. A young gander can digest a great deal that would injure a young goose."

"I daresay he thinks so," said Amabel. "Is Mme. Varasdin like cognac and baccarat?"

"She is agreeable and stimulating," said Mr Newby.

"I should think she is expensive," said Amabel, and then she blushed uncomfortably at her own indiscretion. But it had occurred to her that the gander's pearl necklace must have cost a great deal more than any offerings made by the goose.

"I know I look like an ass," said Mr Newby; "but I assure you I can take care of myself. Don't you worry about me."

"It isn't my business to worry about you."

"I hope that isn't a hint, because I was just going to give you some excellent advice. You go back to England as quick as you can, and let Sheringham sell your Eugenias at a top-price, and live good and quiet in one of those Christian families till you have an uncle or husband to look after you. What you're doing here in Paris with delightful but peculiar people like the Varasdins, nobody can understand."

"I wish you'd come too," said Amabel. "If you were my little brother, I should refuse to leave you behind."

XII

"I wish you'd let me take you as far as the Bois," said Mr Newby. "Suppose Sheringham was detained, and he easily might be, you'd find it very unpleasant waiting about by yourself."

Amabel did not think it likely that Mr Sheringham would disappoint her, but she made no further objection to Mr Newby's proposal, and they drove to the Bois together and were put down at the Avenue des Acacias.

"I don't see him yet," said Mr Newby.

"Perhaps we are early," said Amabel, but she looked at her watch and found that it was after four.

The Avenue was not crowded that afternoon. The pathway was almost deserted; the benches were empty; and carriages and motor cars drove by in a broken procession. There had been a little rain and the air was slightly chilly, but the sun shone out amongst windy clouds and dried the seats and

sparkled on the glistening trees. Amabel was so tired that she was glad to sit down, and though she told Mr Newby not to wait, he sat down with her.

"I'll wait till midnight if you like," he said; "I've nothing to do."

"Perhaps there is a telegram at the Avenue Ernani."

"Very likely. It's the boom, you bet. A man in Mexican Jem's position isn't his own master when there's a boom in his market. If he was—well, he wouldn't be Mexican Jem. He may be on his way back to London."

By this time Amabel began to fear that Mr Sheringham would not come, and the idea appalled her. She had made no plans, she was full of suspicion, and she had counted on him to help her. The thought of him had sustained her courage all through the night and the lagging day; with a thrill in her heart she had come to hear the end of the story he had half told; she had come for his counsel and protection, and had felt sure that he would ask nothing better than to give them. From the moment she escaped from the flat, she had looked to him as a defender. Her disappointment was indistinguishable from her terror, and she felt both anxious and forlorn.

"Is there a boom?" she said flatly.

"There is an almighty boom," chirruped Mr Newby. "Isn't Hyacinth Louis Varasdin agog about it? I thought he dabbled in Mexicans. Those Eugenias of yours now——"

"Don't talk of Eugenias," cried Amabel. "I wish they had gone to smash like an air balloon. They took Uncle Michael away. They bring me nothing but bad luck. I want to be rid of them.

Can't you take them and sell them and give me the money—invest the money for me, I mean? "

"I suppose I could," said Mr Newby. "So could Sheringham. Why not talk to him about it? "

"I meant to talk to him about it," said Amabel, with a quaver in her voice that she tried hard to control.

"You can write to him."

"I don't know his address."

"You might as well say you don't know the King's address. Stock Exchange, London, of course."

"It isn't of course at all. I don't know anything about your Stock Exchange, and booms, and people. What is Mr Sheringham? What is M. Varasdin? Why do you shrug your shoulders at one and go on your knees to the other? What's the difference between them? "

"Oh! Lord!!!" gasped Mr Newby.

"That doesn't tell me."

"One is a *power* and known to be awfully decent, as I said a little while ago; the other—isn't."

"Isn't awfully decent? "

"Rather not?" said Mr Newby. "You have to be jolly well on your guard with Hyacinth Louis, I can tell you."

"Then why do you dine there so often? "

"If it comes to that, why do you? " said Mr Newby, looking very red and uncomfortable.

"I pay Mme. Varasdin seven guineas a week, and, besides that, she owes me a hundred pounds," said Amabel.

Mr Newby could not deny himself a slight whistle. It was not very loud or very long.

"She said you had never paid her a penny yet," he observed. "She said so yesterday as we drove home together."

Amabel looked at him and drew her own conclusions.

"If the truth were known I suspect we have both paid for our dinners," said she; and then she suddenly made up her mind to tell him what had happened and to hear what he had to say.

"Last night Mme. Varasdin came into my room when she thought I was asleep," she began. "She took this purse from under my pillow——"

Mr Newby left off tracing designs in the damp gravel with the point of his stick and sat up with a jerk, facing Amabel. The girl finished her story in words as dry as bones; she told him how she had followed Mme. Varasdin, found the Eugenias in her hands, and got them back again, and how she had felt less afraid at the time than she had done ever since.

"But what did she say?" inquired Mr Newby.

"She said she was a somnambulist, and had been walking in her sleep."

In spite of Amabel's fatigue and disappointment, she could not help laughing at Mr Newby's expression.

"Oh! draw it mild," he murmured.

"It was equally impossible to contradict or to believe her," said Amabel.

"You must go back to England," said Mr Newby, with decision.

"I'm very glad I met you," said Amabel. "If I had come here quite alone and Mr Sheringham had

failed me, I should have been at my wits' end. I can't go to England without my trunks, and I should have been afraid to go back to the flat by myself. I am sure Mme. Varasdin will be furious when she finds I will not stay there any longer. I suppose I must stay one more night."

"Must you?" said Mr Newby doubtfully.

"I would rather travel by day; and I am not afraid, because I shall get Adèle, the *femme-de-chambre*, to sleep in the room, and I shall barricade that door again. I feel sure that she will not make the attempt a second time. She must recognise that she has failed."

"I suppose it is not you who were dreaming?" said Mr Newby. "You are quite certain about it?"

"Yes," said Amabel; and her tone carried conviction.

"I'm expecting you all to dine with me to-night," said Mr Newby. "I arranged it with Mme. Varasdin yesterday. I've found a new restaurant somewhere towards Montmartre that isn't half bad. I suppose, as it is arranged, it must stand, and perhaps it will be pleasanter for you. Otherwise——"

Amabel perceived that the young man believed her, and that he was both shocked and angry. She foresaw that Mme. Varasdin's hold on him would not be as tight as it had been, and that, to this extent at any rate, good was growing out of evil.

"It is past five already," she said. "I think I will go back now and see if there is a telegram."

"I will come with you," said Mr Newby.

"Then I will tell Mme. Varasdin at once, while you are there, that I am going to England to-morrow.

When I have done that the worst will be over. I need hardly see her or speak to her again except at dinner, when you will be there too."

"All right," said Mr Newby. The programme was an uncomfortable one, but he did not know how to amend it. Of course, he must see Amabel through as well as he could, because she was his countrywoman and, for the moment, friendless. It was most unlucky that Sheringham had not turned up. Sheringham had never paid for the Varasdin dinners or presented Mme. Varasdin with pearls, and his championship of Amabel could not have been regarded by his hostess as a slur on herself. Mr Newby was not unwilling to wind up his affairs with the lady; her demands had been excessive lately, and her recent exploit put her beyond the pale of his large tolerance; but he would rather have retired quietly and gradually from the little band of her admirers. As things were, he expected an explosion.

She surprised them both by opening the door of the flat herself, but she gave no reason for doing so, and they followed her into the salon. Amabel felt shy of looking her in the face at first, but she soon found that her embarrassment was not shared by Mme. Varasdin.

"You have missed Mr Sheringham," she said to the girl, and there was a note of malicious satisfaction in her voice. "He came quite early this morning, and seemed surprised not to find you here."

"Oh!" cried Amabel, and in her voice there was bitter disappointment.

"He waited some time, as I said I did not know where you had gone or when you would be back.

Perhaps it struck him, mademoiselle, that you do not treat your hostess very civilly."

"I sent you a message by Adèle," said Amabel.

"I did not receive it."

"I suppose Mr Sheringham left some message?"

"Oh! the usual thing; his kind regards. He was off to London by the 11.50 train."

"Did he say anything had happened to call him back so suddenly?"

"He talked of business matters to M. Varasdin. I paid no attention."

Amabel saw that Mme. Varasdin did not mean to tell her more than she could help about Mr Sheringham's visit, and that it was waste of time to ply her with questions. She felt sick with vexation and disappointment, and it was hard to believe that anything pleasant waited beyond the immediate miserable hour. Mr Newby stood awkwardly beside a group of palms and fiddled with their leaves. For a little while none of the three people spoke.

"He will be over here again in about a fortnight," said Mme. Varasdin, after some reflection.

Amabel saw her opening.

"I shall not be here then," she said firmly.

"What do you mean?" said Mme. Varasdin.

Mr Newby took a step away from the palms, a step towards Amabel. Its significance was not lost on Anastasie, and she included him in her glance of anger and dislike.

"I have decided to go back to London," said Amabel.

"But your uncle expects to find you here."

"I shall communicate with him."

"That will take time."

"No," said Amabel. "I shall telegraph to him from London to-morrow. He left me quite free."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed Mme. Varasdin. "You have been under my care six weeks—when I took you into my house, you were somewhat puzzled and friendless, I think—out of my compassion I threw open my doors to you. My husband and I have treated you as an honoured guest, and without rhyme or reason you want to leave us at a day's notice as you leave an inn. Allow me to inform you, mademoiselle, that your behaviour is not becoming, it is not even honest. I have been put to considerable expense on your account. How do you propose to compensate me?"

"You owe me a hundred pounds," began Amabel, in so low a voice that it hardly reached Mr Newby's ears; but Mme. Varasdin turned and spoke to him.

"Mademoiselle is assuredly a dreamer of dreams," she said, and her hand went to her head for an instant as if to intimate that there was something a little wrong with the girl's mental faculties. "I do not owe her a penny."

For a moment Mr Newby hesitated; but one glance at Amabel's sane, indignant, and contemptuous face convinced him.

"Miss Ferrers is free to go to-morrow if she chooses, you know," he said. "What's the good of making a bother about it? She's homesick, and you can't keep her here by force. As for the money transactions that have taken place between you——"

" I am not going to discuss them with you," said Mme. Varasdin resolutely.

" There is nothing to discuss," said Amabel, getting up. " I shall go to London to-morrow, and I make you a present of a hundred pounds."

She went straight to her own room and rang for Adèle, but no one answered. When she had rung twice she went to the kitchen and then into every room on the flat except the salon. But Adèle was nowhere to be found. As she stood indecisively in the hall, wondering if the girl had been sent out and would soon return, the front door bell rang. She opened the door herself, saw the concierge with a letter in his hand, and observed that Adèle was not at home.

" Does mademoiselle not know? " said the man. " Adèle was dismissed this morning—paid her wages and dismissed. She was so surprised, she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry."

" But why was she dismissed?'" said Amabel, and the man was astonished to see her turn quite pale and weak. She clung to the door and her voice shook when she spoke. He shrugged his shoulders at her question and pointed inside the flat.

" Ladies like madame are violent and capricious," said he. " I believe the poor girl broke a vase. What surprised her was to get paid. She thought she would have to go to the police for her money."

Mr Newby had just got up to go when Amabel entered the room again, looking so white and scared that he took alarm.

" What is it? " he said.

" I'll go to-night," she whispered. " Adèle has

been sent away. I'm afraid to sleep here again. I'll go to-night."

XIII

Mr Newby looked uncomfortably at Mme. Varasdin. She had come up to them and must have heard what Amabel said.

"What is the matter now?" she inquired.

But that was more than Amabel had courage to tell her just then. She stood in the doorway, the picture of agitation and alarm, and she turned her eyes to Mr Newby with an appeal in them that the young man would have responded to at any cost to himself.

"Don't you worry," he said obscurely. "I'll fix things and let you know at dinner. I'm off now. See you again at seven sharp."

"Where?" asked Amabel, who had never before troubled about the name or address of a restaurant at which she was to dine with the Varasdins. He told her and she listened carefully, and then before he had time to make a move, she ran into her own room. They heard the key turn in the lock.

"I'm afraid I frightened the poor girl last night," said Mme. Varasdin, narrowly watching the young Englishman's face. "She seems quite nervous and upset. Instead of going out to dinner, she ought to see a doctor and take a soothing draught. Can't you persuade her to?"

"I'm afraid not," said Mr Newby. "She does seem a bit upset. You see, she has got it into her head that it might happen again."

" She did tell you about it, then ! How unnecessary and disloyal to gossip with a stranger about the infirmity of a friend ! I am disappointed in Miss Ferrers."

" Well ! you've almost seen the last of her."

" I suppose she means to return here to-night ? "

" Oh ! didn't you hear what she said to me ? She prefers to sleep in Paris to-night, so as to be nearer the Nord for her start, I suppose. It is quite a good idea."

" I don't agree with you. This young lady is staying in my house. Her uncle put her in my care. At a moment's notice, without apology or explanation, she decamps, abetted by you. What do you suppose her uncle will say and her English friends ? What are your intentions with regard to her ? "

" My intention is to have dinner with you and your husband and Miss Ferrers, and then to take you to some of those Montmartre theatres, as we arranged last night. That's all at present," said Mr Newby, and he walked away. The lady made no effort to detain him. She waited until she heard her husband's step in the corridor, and then she went out to meet him. He took a long time to hang up his hat and coat, and then he strolled towards her as if there was no hurry. He did not observe that her face was livid with anger and impatience.

" Come into my room," she said.

Her room was at the further end of the flat, and the only available door faced the long, narrow passage. As M. Varasdin was about to shut it, his wife pulled it roughly from him and set it wide ajar.

" I want no listeners," said she.

"Are the servants about? I don't hear them."

"I want no servants," said Mme. Varasdin. "The cook went yesterday, I sent off Adèle to-day."

"What for?"

"So that we should be by ourselves—with Miss Ferrers. Is that plain enough, fool?"

The man shuffled uncomfortably in his chair. He had sat down in the easiest at once and had yawned and stretched his legs, but now he looked up at his wife, who seemed suddenly to be standing over him, her face and her whole body tense with anger.

"You are pleased to yawn and stretch your legs," she said; "I suppose you think there is nothing else for you to do to-night?"

"I hope there is dinner," he said, with artificial gaiety.

"It is your one thought. And pray what have you brought me of late to buy dinner with?"

"I can't bring you what I haven't got," said the man, his flaccid face overcast and scowling. "I'm cleared out. I had to borrow a few francs from Gregorio to-day to pay my *déjeuner* and my tram fares. You'll have to give me something for to-morrow."

"I have nothing to give. I am not going to sell my jewels to support a scamp like you. I owe Miss Ferrers a hundred pounds."

"Those Eugenias would set us right. They are at four to-day and will go much higher when confirmation of the strike comes. We could buy a little villa somewhere on the Riviera and there would be an end to this dog's life——"

"Some dogs earn a living," said Mme. Varasdin.

"They are harnessed in carts and work hard. Some lie on cushions and eat and sleep and grow fat. Which kind of dog are you, my friend?"

"Oh, your tongue!" said the man. "Get the Eugenias, and then talk if you please."

"It isn't so easy. I've tried twice and failed. Your turn comes now. You have the evening before you."

"The evening!"

"Mademoiselle has taken fright. She does not like a somnambulist. She sleeps at a hotel to-night. To-morrow she goes to England."

"*Diable!*" said M. Varasdin. "And you call yourself clever!"

"You must remember that in the matter of criminal offences it is I who am the amateur," said his wife.

"You are the kind of woman one strangles in the end," said he.

"You perceive how we stand, I hope," she continued. "We have nothing but debts, and I should like to know in which capital of Europe you have the shreds of a reputation. Paris was our last chance, and here too you have burnt your fingers. You are not the man to prosper in a new country. What lies before you unless you get hold of these Eugenias? If you come back to-night without them you have seen the last of me. I am at the end of my patience. Your rascalities land you in prison instead of at the top of the tree, and I have told you before that poverty is not to my taste. I was not made for it."

The man cowered as he listened to his wife's tirade, and he muttered again that he had been unlucky and that he couldn't pick up money in the streets, and that

their separation would not do either of them any good.

"I'm tired of supporting you," she said; "that's the long and the short of it. You haven't earned a sixpence this year."

"You scold and you scold, but you don't tell me what I'm to do," complained M. Varasdin.

"We are dining with Newby to-night. After dinner I am going out with him. You will naturally conduct Miss Ferrers to her hotel. You are not a somnambulist. You have escorted her here and there these six weeks. She can find no reason to refuse."

"She can insist on a cab. It will be a ten minutes' drive."

"Persuade her to walk, then. But I leave the details to you. I admit that the matter has elements of difficulty. At the same time I must remind you of the desperate condition of our own affairs. After all, you are a man. The meanest hound amongst you has the pull when it comes to muscle. The most beautiful woman in the world, the cleverest woman in the world walks through life knowing that any blackguard can knock her down. It doesn't happen, you say? Look through that pile of old newspapers. If you can find one without a case of it I'll give you twenty francs for your *déjeuner* to-morrow."

M. Varasdin did not search through the papers to which his wife pointed. He was thinking hard.

"Where are we dining, do you say?"

"At that restaurant Newby has just discovered, right away towards Montmartre."

"She knows her way about Paris?"

"She knows how to get from here to the Louvre in

a cab or a tram. She knows the Madeleine and the Place de la Concorde. She has stared at Notre-Dame. She has never been near all those quiet old streets you will be near to-night."

"It is impossible. I should be suspected. The police would be on us in a few hours."

"If you bungle. What does suspicion matter so long as proof is impossible. Of course, you must come straight back here, and, according to what has happened, we shall act. Don't run away in a panic and have a hue-and-cry after you before morning. Probably we shall sit still, answer all questions, and snap our fingers in the end. It is either that or the gutter for both of us."

"You are sure of that?"

Mme. Varasdin shrugged her shoulders. A clock in the room struck six. It was time for her to dress, and she took from the wardrobe the quiet, close-fitting gown she considered suitable that night. The man sat staring at the floor, and biting his lips, and sighing hard sometimes. He looked like a stupid, evil beast caught in a trap, and he could see no way out except the one he feared to try. He had led a life of mean shifts; had sat in an Austrian prison as a swindler; and had left an equivocal name in many cities. At the beginning of his career he had shown some skill in playing the devil's game with money; had floated wild-cat companies, and had been known to fools, first as a financier and then as a knave. He had feasted and roystered, and starved and despaired. Over and over again his wife had lifted him out of the mire with money got he asked not how. She was so clever and so prudent that, of late, they had

even gained a footing in the semi-respectable society formed by the successful of his kind in Paris, and had led an agreeable life there. He was no worse, he told himself, than other men; no worse than that arch-swindler, Jacob Wolfenstein; not much worse than old Gregorio; a little better, perhaps, than the notorious Whitley Brown, who still sat at good men's tables, whose wife had curtseyed to kings. It was his dire misfortune that ruin had him by the throat unless he committed a theft for which want of scruple was not sufficient without pluck and sleight of hand.

Meanwhile, Amabel got ready for dinner and packed what she needed for the night in a small handbag she could, at a pinch, carry. The Eugenias she put into a chatelaine bag that fastened into her waistband by a long, broad hook. She thought they were safer on her body than in either of her trunks. Besides, in half an hour she would be done with this household, where sinister deeds seemed real, and not, as they seem to most of us, half fabulous. When she thought of the Varasdins now she thought of events, and words, and glances that all helped, like lights turned up of a sudden, to show their true colours. She remembered their straits for money, their cat-and-dog life, the extravagance of the woman, the idle complaisance of the man. The thought of another night on the flat had become unbearable. With Adèle to keep her company, she might have endured it; by herself she knew she could not. She shuddered at the thought of Mme. Varasdin's hands near her throat again. What she feared the girl could hardly have told you, but sheer physical terror unnerved her, and her one

desire was to get away—away from this woman and back to the company of honest men.

When she was ready she listened anxiously at her door and heard no movement anywhere on the flat. She took a sudden resolve, crept softly to the front door, which was near her own, opened it without noise and let herself down in the lift. As she descended she trembled lest she should still by some miracle be overtaken, yet she stopped for a moment to speak to the concierge, to give him a present of money, and to leave an address for letters. Then she went out into the street, hailed an open cab, and drove to the address Mr Newby had given her. He was waiting near the door, and he looked surprised to see her arrive alone.

"Aren't the Varasdins coming?" said he.

"Oh yes!" said Amabel. "But I thought I wouldn't wait for them. I wanted to ask you about a hotel."

"I've taken a room for you at the Ritz," said Mr Newby. "You see, they know your uncle there. You'll be all right. I'm sorry I can't see you off to-morrow, but I've promised to show some people round Versailles, and we have to make an early start."

Amabel thanked him, and they went inside the restaurant, sat down at the table he had chosen, and began to talk of indifferent things. She felt relieved and happy and a little excited, as men do when they have faced danger and passed safely by. Her thoughts turned to England and to the circumstances of her new life there, and she told Mr Newby how few friends she had and how she would not know where

to lay her head until she had consulted with Mrs Pugsley.

"That state of things won't last long," said Mr Newby sagely. "Money makes friends."

"It makes enemies too," said Amabel rather ruefully. "The moment I get to London I shall send these hateful Eugenias to Mr Sheringham and ask him to get rid of them for me. Uncle Michael told me to wait, but I don't think he'll mind when he hears what a worry they've been, and Mr Sheringham will know when they ought to be sold, I suppose. Isn't it odd that a musty old bit of paper like this should be worth so much money, that people should covet it, that I should have to guard it as if it was a jewel, and that I can sell it and get real treasures with it—clothes, and books, and music, and journeys, if I choose, to Ultima Thule."

She had taken the certificate out of her bag and unfolded it for Mr Newby to see, and their heads were bent over it when the swish of a silk gown close by arrested Mr Newby's attention.

"Put it away," he said under his breath, and got up to receive M. and Mme. Varasdin. Amabel hurriedly thrust the paper into the bag at her side and looked up to see whether the husband and wife had observed her. Apparently they were both engrossed in apologising to Mr Newby for being a quarter of an hour late.

"We waited for mademoiselle," they said, but their manner conveyed no reproach. Indeed, their bland civility almost persuaded Amabel that her own behaviour had been panic-stricken and rude. Nevertheless the thought of sleeping at the Ritz was comfortable.

XIV

The paraphernalia of common life, the habits of the body, and the company of ordinary men, all combine to give tragedy a distant and improbable air. Yet it takes little faith and less reflection to show that in every tragedy, whether of crime or fate or passion, all parts are played by men whose needs and occupations are as everyday as our own. In real life the most awful events are not detached from the trivial as they are in poetry; our spirits agonise in human bodies with human needs, and the sun shines on sorrow as often as on joy. Nevertheless, so narrow is our vision, so hidebound our intelligence, we find it difficult to see in the mingled yarn the thread of grief or danger that will soon be inextricably woven. Amabel sat at table in a well-lighted, well-appointed Parisian restaurant. The silver and glass were shining, the dishes were dainty, the guests who sat at other tables afforded her entertainment. She drank champagne, and that cheerful wine restored her; she heard Mme. Varasdin and Mr Newby discuss the various ways of cooking mutton, and that curiously encouraged her. She inhabited a safe, commonplace corner of the world, where people were occupied with their palates and did not contemplate deeds of violence. Her fears fell from her, she took an interest in the menu, and she addressed herself to her dinner and to M. Varasdin.

Amabel still thought him a mere animated barber's block, and admired him so little that the very phrase, *bel homme*, the phrase his wife used to describe him, had been lowered in its meaning, and she would not

have applied it except to cast some slur of hollowness and vanity. This evening, he seemed to be in a silent mood, and he made so little response to Amabel's efforts that she guessed him to be sulky over her departure, and left him alone. Mme. Varasdin took note of this at once, and drew the girl into conversation without any sign of rancour or regret. Her bland face showed no change, her questions expressed her interest in Amabel's plans, and her manner suggested the tolerance with which a healthy person condones the fancies of an invalid.

"Are you going straight to your friends?" she asked. "Do they expect you?"

"I shall telegraph to them to-morrow," said Amabel.

"But you must give me an address for letters," said Mme. Varasdin.

"I have left one with the concierge," said the girl.

The lady then began to talk about London. Unhappily for that city, she had not enjoyed a fortnight she spent there some years ago. It was impossible, she said, to think much of a nation that eats parboiled cabbage with its dinner every day and sleeps on small oblong pillows. Amabel asked her about theatres and picture-galleries, but she said she had not troubled to visit either, as she had always been told that the English could not act or paint.

"Nor have you any musicians or poets," she added. "It is very strange."

"The wonder is that a nation so compact of evil and stupidity can exist at all," said Mr Newby, with something rather like a wink at Amabel.

"You are decaying fast," said M. Varasdin solemnly.

He was rather flushed, and had emptied his glass oftener than usual.

"I have enjoyed being in Paris," said Amabel; "and to come across French people everywhere is like living in a fairy story where the fountains run with champagne. I like their talk and their smiles, and their quickness, and their kind, pretty ways. But I want to get back to my own country, too. It is only in your own country that you know what other people are thinking. Besides, I am homesick for toast and tea, and the illustrated papers, and a cabman who can drive, and a bobby like a monument. Is it windy to-night? I hardly noticed. Shall I have a smooth crossing?"

"I don't think so," said Mr Newby; "a wind's getting up."

Then the talk turned on Channel passages and the Channel tunnel, and from that went wide over the high seas. Mr Newby had been round the world, and told stories of Japan and China; and Mme. Varasdin asked questions about Indian cities and about the native princes he had met out there, and about their European hangers-on.

"Don't you know a Rajah who wants a secretary and treasurer?" said she; "a rich Rajah, who would give Hyacinth a salary for managing his finances, and me some big diamonds because I am so charming. I am tired of Europe. I should like to get away into a bigger, wider world."

Mr Newby said he did not think a native Indian city would seem very big or very wide after the first three months. He recommended Charing Cross. That suggested a comparison of cities, and it appeared

that Mme. Varasdin knew most of the important European ones west of Russia and south of Berlin. Amabel, who only knew London and Paris, could not join in this discussion, and she fell to thinking how odd it was that she should sit amicably at table with people she was leaving in such a way and for such a reason. It seemed impossible that both should be real—the woman who crawled and stole in the night, and this cheerful dining-room with the guests and the busy servants, and Mr Newby, and the well-dressed, easy-mannered woman next to him. But when Amabel looked at M. Varasdin, she felt some return of the vague uneasiness left by the shock she had sustained. As the dinner proceeded, his face grew more deeply flushed; for once, wine did not loose his tongue, and the man who was usually a big eater and noisy and boastful in his talk, now played with his food, consumed nothing, and sat so brooding and speechless that Mr Newby at last noticed his unnatural mood.

"What are you hatching, Varasdin?" he said. "Going to make your fortune to-morrow? Laying the plans to-night?"

"He really has that appearance," said his wife; "I hope it is so. Hyacinth, I drink to your success. Lay your plans well to-night. See that they succeed and bring us good fortune to-morrow."

"We'll all join in that toast," said Mr Newby, and he raised his glass. Of course, Amabel did so too.

"I wish you good luck," she said to M. Varasdin.

She thought he behaved rather badly. He took no notice of her sentiment, he did not look her way; he emptied his glass in such haste that he was near

choking over it, and he set it down with such an unsteady hand that he brushed against other glasses and upset them. His wife frowned as she watched him.

"You do not respond to mademoiselle," she observed. "She drinks to your success. Drink with her."

At his wife's bidding, M. Varasdin refilled his glass and sipped from it with a perfunctory bow in Amabel's direction, but his eyes avoided her, and it was to Mr Newby, who sat opposite, that he addressed his next remarks.

"All my life I have been dogged by bad luck," he said. "It is little enough that I want of the world, yet I don't seem able to get it. Why does one man succeed and the other fail? Can you teach me the trick? But I suppose you have never earned a sixpence yourself. You took the trouble to be born of a lucky father. You found your bed ready made."

"Oh, luck changes," said his wife lightly. "Yours is on its way, my friend." Then she deftly stopped the lachrymose rejoinder she saw coming by a request for her cloak. It was time to say good-bye and start, she reminded Mr Newby.

Amabel thought the moment a difficult one. The Varasdins were quite civil, although her stampede from their roof was hostile and perhaps ridiculous. Their urbanity put her in the wrong, and though she held to her resolve, she felt apologetic, doubtful, and conciliatory as she offered Mme. Varasdin her hand. The lady just took it and let it drop again. She was occupied with the clasps of her cloak and was evidently not stirred either to compunction or to shame.

"Hyacinth will take you to your hotel," she said.

"It is unnecessary," said Amabel; "I can have a cab."

"Allow me to render you this small service, mademoiselle," said M. Varasdin, and there was a note of offence in his tone, as if he scented distrust and defied the girl to express it. Amabel, inclined to doubt her own conclusions, gave in at once. They started before the others, and M. Varasdin carried the small dressing-bag she had taken with her for the night. When they got outside M. Varasdin looked at the sky and observed that the rain held off and that if mademoiselle pleased they might walk to the Place Vendôme.

"But you are turning the wrong way," said Amabel.

"It is a quiet way that I know very well," said M. Varasdin.

Amabel had little idea of locality, and she had never been on foot in this neighbourhood before. Her companion dived down side streets, took a turn to the left, a turn to the right, and in a few minutes hopelessly confused her. From where they walked now she could not have found her way to the Madeleine or to any other point well known to her. They were in a poorer quarter than she had seen yet, and some of the streets were empty and badly lighted. She kept her eyes open for a cab, but none plied for hire here. She began to wish herself back amongst the busy traffic of the city, where the crowd would have given her a sense of safety. The man beside her hardly opened his mouth, and that was not his wont, and added to her uneasiness. She tried to talk, and her own voice vexed her, it was so artificial. She forgot her fatigue and set a hurried step, and looked

furtively behind when M. Varasdin dropped back a yard or two. She observed that he did this whenever the street was empty, but that when other people were in sight he kept easily abreast. If he had let her lag behind she thought she could have endured a little longer, but it set her nerves on edge to listen for his footfall at her heels and to turn her head and see him close at her shoulder. The ignoble lines in his face, of self-indulgence and ill-humour, were set as if in a mask to-night, and as he hovered near her, still and threatening, she wondered which was the real man, this ruffian or the *bel homme* all volubility and smiles.

They turned now into a long, badly lighted street of tumble-down private houses, and there was not a sound or a sight here to allay Amabel's vague alarm. The very windows were mostly in darkness, the noise of busier streets sounded far away, and there was not a footstép on the pavement except their own.

"I am sure we are wrong," she said, with decision. "When we get to the end of this street I shall take a cab. I have been out all day and am tired."

She spoke because the silence and the deserted street were terrifying. It reassured her to break the silence and to talk as if nothing worse was on her mind than her weary body and this weary trudge. But she made the mistake that a timid person makes when he snatches his hand too suddenly from an uncertain dog and so decides him to spring. M. Varasdin understood that it was now or never. He fell a step behind again, and she turned her head at once and caught him shifting the bag he carried from the left hand to the right.

At that moment a house door opened and shut again with a bang, and a boy came whistling into the street. He walked ahead of them on the opposite side, and Amabel had it in her mind to run across the road and walk close to him until they reached a more frequented part where there would be a constant stream of people and the chance of a cab. But the boy walked fast, and was fast outstripping them. She hurried her own steps to keep up with him. The man by her side muttered some remonstrance she scarcely heard, and placed himself close to her and on the kerb, so that she must pass behind him or in front of him to cross. The boy's whistle grew a little fainter with every yard they covered, and she had to strain her eyes now to make out his figure. As long as she saw it, as long as she heard him, she thought the chances might still be with her, and she looked for the end of the long street and hoped that her strength and courage would not fail her. For it was not easy to walk steadily forward with a cool head and her heart beating hard against her side. The boy changed his tune, whistled the new one a little louder, and as it seemed to her for a moment slackened his pace. She leapt in front of M. Varasdin, thinking to cross at any hazards, and win to safety. And then she halted on the kerb, stricken helpless with disappointment. The boy had swung open the heavy door of a courtyard, and shut it behind him. She looked despairingly down the narrow street, and saw no one to take his place. M. Varasdin had come close behind her again, and she moved swiftly to one side. But as she did so, she saw his uplifted arm, and before she could escape, before

she could guard herself or even scream, the bag he carried came down on her head and shoulder with a smashing blow. She groaned and fell, and lost all consciousness.

In a moment M. Varasdin swooped over her inert body, and unhooked the chatelaine purse from her waistband. The girl lay quite still, and he could not hear her breathe. But he had no courage to make sure that she was dead. His own limbs were so tremulous now, that he kept on his feet with difficulty. He stuffed the purse into his pocket, picked up the travelling bag, got to the other side of the street, and walked quickly and softly to the end of it. He arrived at an open place where other streets converged, and where other people were passing. At one corner there was a café, not well lighted, and as far as the outside seats went, nearly empty. He sat down here and called for a cognac. For the moment he was at the end of his strength, and at the end of his resources. His thoughts were in a flurry. He did not know what to do next, or what would happen if Amabel was dead, or if she rose as a witness against him. He did not know which he desired, to have succeeded as a murderer, or to have bungled this business as he had done many others. He had the Eugenias in his pocket, and took no thought of them. He felt sick and chilly, and offended with fate; but above all offended with his wife, who had driven him to do this dangerous thing, and sat safely at home herself. He cursed her for letting him undertake it without money in his pocket. He could not make good his escape until he had gone home and found her, and procured money for his travelling expenses. He ought to have fore-

seen this, and brought money with him, and be on his way already. It would waste hours to go out to Passy and return to Paris. The police would soon be astir. But Anastasie had said something about flight being unnecessary. He could not remember—did not understand. The waiter might bring another cognac. He was not ill, at least he did not count a touch of ague as illness. The man might bring him a double quantity if he pleased. It was showery to-day, and the damp easily affected him. Also, he had walked far. One franc, twenty? It was well. The waiter could keep the change.

M. Varasdin lifted the glass to his lips and set it down again, because his trembling hand would not hold it. His face was petrified in fear and surprise, and if he had not sat alone in the half-darkness of an ill-lighted corner of the café, his condition must inevitably have attracted notice. His eyes were fixed on the pitiful figure of Amabel staggering slowly across the Place, her hand held to her head, her clothes in disorder, her face discoloured with blood. She came straight towards him. He could see her blind and terrified eyes; and he rose hurriedly to his feet with a scream. But his scream was drowned in the shout that went up from every side, and in the puffing noise of a motor car that dashed out of a side street across the Place, and, as it seemed, right over the girl. When M. Varasdin came to his senses he saw a crowd gathered where Amabel had stood. The waiter who had served him came away from it and spoke as he passed.

"It is a young lady," he said; "she is quite dead."

XV

Mme. Varasdin was decidedly in a difficult mood. The players did not amuse her, and she left the theatre at the end of the first act. She had no mind for a café, or for a variety show, or for anything else that Mr Newby proposed.

"I am not very well to-night," she said. "It is an influenza. Get me a cab and don't come near me for two days. I detest seeing my friends when I am ill. There is only one thing I hate more, and that is seeing them when they are ill. Sick people ought to hide."

"But you seemed all right at dinner," said Mr Newby.

"These things come on very quickly sometimes. Yes, call that driver with the white hat. By the way, shall you see Miss Ferrers again before she starts for England?"

"I'm afraid not. I've promised to be at Versailles all day to-morrow with two Yanks who are staying at my hotel, and we start early. Yanks are so beastly energetic. Had you any message?"

"None at all. Besides, she must fetch or send for her trunks. She was an amiable young person. It is a pity she was subject to unamiable delusions. I hope she will go to the Ritz to-night and to England to-morrow. But I do not feel sure. She was in an excitable condition. I think she needs great care. I am glad to see that your interest in her is not as deep as I feared. I wish I felt equally safe about Hyacinth. You observed his dejection at dinner.

The news of Miss Ferrers' departure cast that gloom over him."

"Much more likely the state of the market," said Mr Newby. "A boom, when you're not in it, is depressing."

The symptoms of lassitude and fever that had afflicted Mme. Varasdin vanished as the cab turned westwards. She was impatient to be at home. She thought it most likely that Hyacinth's courage had failed him, that he had done nothing at all, and that life would go on as it threatened, leading them in no time to open disgrace and destitution. She had her jewels, but it is not easy to sell jewels profitably when once the police are on your track, and when they do not belong to you at all but to your creditors. With a man like her husband, affairs must needs grow worse as time goes on and proves his incapacity and want of faith by a whole known history of questionable transactions. His friends had fallen from him, his credit was gone, his name was rank in the market-place. She could, of course, leave him to his fate. That path lay before her, but without seduction. She knew too much about the career open to an extravagant woman, unclassed, idle, and in some measure fastidious. The future held one hope, and before midnight she would know whether or not it was fulfilled. Small wonder that her mood was restless, and that she had no mind for the unrealities of the play. Her fate hung on her husband's boldness and discretion, and she knew him to be a coward and a fool.

In the improbable event of his success there was still a difficult question before her, and she saw that she might have to settle it suddenly. He would want

to keep the plunder in his own slippery hands; he would play ducks and drakes with it, and a few months hence they would be beggared again. This issue was much in her thoughts as she approached the Avenue Ernani. She looked up at her windows and saw no light there. She paid the cabman, went up in the lift, and opened the door with her latch-key. She looked into every room and found that her husband had not returned. Then she sat down in her own room, and for some time did not stir even to remove her hat and gloves. She had to think and decide. What should she do if he came back having attempted nothing? What should she do if he had tried and failed? Suppose he absconded with the shares and she never saw him again? Suppose he brought them back and refused her a share in them? Whatever he did, he would act solely for himself, she knew. She hoped nothing of him, hardly wished him otherwise. Most of all she wished him dead and out of her way. For a long while now she had seen that this solution was the only convenient one; he did no good in the world. No one would miss or bemoan him. He had not won the esteem or the affection of one fellow-creature on his way through life. He was a man without a friend. Unfortunately the law takes no count of quality, and it is as dangerous to rid society of a drone as of a hero. It behoved her to keep out of danger, and she thought she saw a way, a way she would not take, however, unless the need arose. Hyacinth should live if he showed himself amenable; even if he came back with empty hands he should live. Nothing should condemn him short of his own greed.

Mme. Varasdin got up and unlocked her jewel case. She took from it a small bottle with the label of a Vienna chemist. It contained a strong preparation of morphia that had been given her some years ago to relieve pain. She had always kept it, and had sometimes felt tempted to use it and so shuffle off the coil of life. She had never before thought of administering it to anyone else. She would not think of it now with any steadiness or decision, but she soaked the bottle in water and removed the label and burnt it. The little bottle she hid in the pouched bodice of her dress. Then she took off her hat and went into the dining-room and turned on the lights. She had just put brandy on the sideboard and soda water and glasses, when she heard a slight sound at the front door, and then a stealthy step in the hall. As she turned round her husband appeared in the room.

He was trembling with triumph and excitement; yet he looked about him as he came in and she saw that he was afraid.

"I am alone," she said. "What has happened?"

"I have succeeded where you failed," said he.

His wife looked at the bag he carried in his hand.

"I see you have brought that bag here as a witness against you," she observed. "The shares——"

"The shares are in my pocket," he cried, and he put down the bag and took from his coat pocket the purse containing the shares. His wife stood near the sideboard and watched him. She saw him open the purse and she saw the certificate in his hands. He unfolded it, fluttered it towards her, and then put it in his coat again. The purse he left lying on the table.

"Are you safe here even for an hour?" said his wife.

"The poor girl is dead," said the man, with a shudder...

"You would certainly not be safe if she was alive," said Mme. Varasdin.

"You told me I should. You told me to come back. But no one knows I am here. As I came in I gave the name of Duval, the people above us."

"What makes you think the girl is dead? How did you get the shares?"

"How does one get anything one wants? I took them."

"Was there a scene? A noise? A crowd? How did you get away?"

"Ask such questions of a fool and not of me. I am new to the game, yet I played it with skill. We were in a deserted street—I had this bag in my hands—and I tell you once for all, Anastasie, that I will not speak of what happened. A man of my calibre cannot shrink from a disagreeable necessity, but I suppose a cook who has to wring the neck of a pigeon does not dwell on it afterwards with any pleasure."

"A cook is not in danger of the guillotine," said Mme. Varasdin.

"I did not kill the girl myself," said her husband sulkily.

But the colour had gone from his face, and his voice was harsh and shaky when he began to speak again.

"I left her lying on the pavement."

"Oh! I guessed that," interrupted his wife. "You

knocked her down, took her purse, and ran away in a fright, the proofs gaping in your hands. Well?"

"I felt dreadfully upset. My knees were loose under me. So I sat down at a café——"

"How far off?"

"Beyond the end of the street. I drank three cognacs before my strength returned. I tell you that what I have done to-night is not easy to do; and what I saw next was not pleasant to see. The girl came staggering across the Place towards me."

"I thought so."

"If you know what happened I may save myself the trouble of telling you. Perhaps you know what the girl looked like . . . that she had her hand to her head . . . that there was blood on her face . . . have you that picture in your mind? . . . I would gladly transfer it from my own . . . and what came next . . . that was worse to see."

"Oh, go on!" said Mme. Varasdin, with exasperation.

"She was knocked down by a motor car and killed on the spot."

"How do you know she was killed?"

"Everyone rushed to see—except the man on the motor car. He got clean away. Everyone was cursing and shouting, and I heard several people say she was dead. She must have been. I saw the car knock her down."

"At this moment she is probably in the hands of the police and is giving evidence against you," said Mme. Varasdin.

"But if she is dead we are safe. She will not have her address on her clothes."

"You can never tell. She might have a card or a letter on her. Dead or alive, she may send the police here any moment to catch you — with her property in your hands. Is there no river? Are there no byways in Paris, you fool? How dare you come back with that bag and that purse — to compromise us both?"

The man's face was dazed and his body was shivering with fear.

"What will happen if she lives?" he said, in a whisper.

"The police will come—and this time it will be Cayenne. The life there is not agreeable, I believe. Come; pull yourself together, my friend. Every minute that you spend here is a folly."

"Why did you tell me to do it?"

"I didn't tell you to do it badly."

M. Varasdin got up, his eyes staring wide at his wife, his hands thrown out towards her.

"Give me money," he said; "I must go straight to Buda-Pesth and sell the shares."

"Are you mad?" said his wife. "You must go straight to South America. I will watch events here, and when it is safe I will go to Buda-Pesth and sell the shares."

M. Varasdin looked distrustfully at his wife.

"I ran the risk," he said; "they are mine. I mean to turn them into a million. As for South America, it is too obvious. Besides, it lies across the sea, and I have always thought that if I was in danger I would avoid big ports. I believe in the Danubian towns. From Buda-Pesth I shall go to Sofia."

"I advise you, if you value your safety, to leave the shares with me," said his wife.

He hardly heard what she said. He was listening to every sound that came up from the street below, and his eyes were haggard.

"I must go," he said. "Give me money."

His wife did not move, but her eyes were fastened on him intently, and she watched him take Amabel's purse from his pocket and empty the contents on the table. There was a small handkerchief, some loose gold and silver, ten hundred-franc notes, and the folded certificate of the Eugenias.

"I can do without you," he said.

"Are you going to keep it all?" she asked; "all the money, as well as the shares?"

"I shall want it if the police are after me. You can any time raise enough to join me. Sell your pearls."

"The French police are quick and clever. Of course, you will change your name. But have you anything in your pockets to betray you—except the shares—any letters? Any marks on your clothes?"

The man dived into his pockets and pulled out a silver cigarette-case, a handkerchief, and various cards and letters.

"There is nothing else," he said. "Now, I will go."

"I will come with you to the station," said his wife.

"Shall I take a bag with what I want?"

"Nothing—nothing by which you might be known. If you were wise you would leave me the Eugenias."

"And never see either them or you again—and

be hunted like a mad dog—and not a penny to make it worth while—do you take me for a fool? You have driven me into a crime—do you think I love the sight of your face when I remember the girl's? I struck the blow—but it is you who have a heart of stone."

"But it is you the police will take," said Mme. Varasdin, and she laughed.

"We waste time," said the man; "I must catch the midnight train."

Mme. Varasdin went to her own rooms and put on a close hat, a thick veil, and a dark, long cloak; clothes in which she was inconspicuous and almost unrecognisable. She did not fasten her cloak yet, and she carried her gloves in her hands. She was not away three minutes, but when she returned to her husband she found him in a state of collapse that threatened to be unmanageable. He was shaking like a man with a palsy; when he tried to stand, he sank back into his chair; when he tried to speak, sobs came from his throat and tears rolled down his grey shrunken face. He met his wife's eyes and found no pity in them.

"I can't walk," he moaned; "what shall I do?"

Mme. Varasdin went to the sideboard. She filled a high tumbler nearly half full of brandy; she took the little bottle from her dress and emptied it into the glass; she added soda-water and carried the drink to him.

"A dose of morphia will do him no harm," she said to herself, and whether she believed it or not her shifty soul hardly knew. She watched him empty the glass. Then she swept together the things

on the table, and put them into Amabel's travelling bag.

"This must go into the Seine to-night," she said.

"I feel better," said M. Varasdin; "I could walk some distance now. We will take a cab where we are not known. But if the police come to-day or to-morrow, what shall you say?"

"I shall have nothing to say. I shall not know where you are or what you have done. We shall not be able to communicate with each other, but that will not trouble you greatly, I imagine. You will console yourself by reflecting that I can sell the pearls."

"I wonder why you are coming with me to the station?" said the man suspiciously. "I don't believe you care whether I am dead or alive."

"I am coming to get rid of this bag, and to see you don't muddle your departure," said Mme. Varasdin. "You know I am not fond of notoriety and the guillotine."

"You would not care," muttered M. Varasdin. "You would think of yourself, and not of me, even then. You have a heart of stone."

XVI

They crept softly down the stairs and across the dark hall to the front door without waking the concierge.

"The less attention we draw to ourselves the better," said Mme. Varasdin. "Our door shuts without a sound if one is careful."

"I can hardly drag myself along," said M. Varas-

din. "I feel very queer; I am drunk, I believe. You must have given me too much brandy."

Mme. Varasdin looked up and down the broad, well-lighted avenue. There were a few people about still, and the tram cars were still running. If her husband fell like a log here in the street, and a crowd gathered and the police interfered, all they had done to-night would be of no avail, would be made horribly public, and would bring on her head the utmost misery and shame. The treasure for which she had thrown away the last shreds of self-respect would be found on his person and lost to her; the drug in his system would be found by some meddling physician, found perhaps while Hyacinth was still conscious and could charge her, found and treated perhaps, so that to her torment he remained alive. As he lurched beside her, stupid, sick, and covetous, she did not repent of what she had done, though she threw a sop to her flickering conscience by telling herself that the dose had been haphazard, and that he might not die.

She turned down a by-street as soon as she could. He shambled along beside her, but his gait began to drag and his breathing to sound heavy, and she was glad to hail the first close cab they met. She helped him in, and then she told the driver to go by the Champs Elysées to a café on the Boulevard des Italiens, a route that at this hour of the night would take them through the crowds coming away from the Opera and from theatres. She was not quite sure of what would happen next, but she knew she must somehow make her escape, and that it would be easiest to make it in a crowd.

"Did you tell him the Garde de L'Est?" said M. Varasdin, when they had started.

"Certainly not," she said; "when the police are after you he might remember driving you there. We will get out somewhere near and walk to the station."

The man made no answer, but lolled in the corner of the cab, his head shaken with every jolt, his arms hanging limply at his sides. When they passed a café, or crossed one of the open places where streets converge and there are many twinkling lights, Mme. Varasdin looked anxiously at his face, and she saw that the pupils of his eyes were small and sharp, and his mouth a little open; while his breathing grew heavier and his hands felt cold.

She waited a little longer. They were crossing the Place de la Concorde when she ventured very cautiously to unfasten the buttons of his coat. Her own breath came with difficulty, the suspense of the moment was so painful. Everything hung on the next few minutes: her future, her freedom, ease, or infamy. She felt neither pity nor shame, but horror of his heavy body and his helplessness. To be shut up with him turned her faint, and for an instant she wavered, thinking to call for help. Then she roused herself, took the little bottle from its hiding-place, and left it beside him on the seat. Her hand paused on his arm, slid to his heart, felt the quick, uneven beats, and crept very carefully to the place where the treasure was carried. He made no sign. She understood that he was past all desire, and she half envied him. He had persistently stood at ease while others struggled, and it seemed to her that he was

doing so still, sleeping, safe and idle, while she heard the wolves.

But she held in her hand the scrap of paper for which she had gone to the depths. She had possession of the Eugenias and the roll of notes, and a handful of loose coin. And the miracle went on, the treasure was hidden now on her own person, and still he did not wake. She looked out of the cab at the busy life of the main Boulevards they were now traversing. From each theatre a crowd came forth to swell the evening traffic, the cafés were overflowing, and wherever there was some slight attraction, the changing lights of an advertisement, or a gay shop window, people gathered in clusters on the pavement. The vehicular traffic of Paris is, of course, insignificant compared with that of London, but the combination of bad driving, furious motor cars, steam trams, and heavy carts, bring about some pretty tangles. Mme. Varasdin was on the look-out for a block of this kind, and she found herself in one near the Opera House, from which a stream of carriages was now debouching. The instant her chance came she had the wit and nerve to take it. On one side of the cab there was a puffing motor car, on the other a labyrinth of carriages; her horse's head was nearly inside the door of a tram car; there were market carts and newspaper boys, and cyclists with Chinese lanterns, and a frantic gendarme with a white baton; and behind her more carts and carriages, all for the moment at a standstill. She opened the cab door, saw that the driver was absorbed in an altercation with a cyclist, and stepped to the ground unobserved. The clamour was so great that she ventured to push

the door to again, and then she slipped to the back of the cab, and, with some risk to her limbs, made her way to the pavement. As she reached it the tram car started, and the whole block of vehicles moved slowly on.

Mme. Varasdin had Amabel's bag in her hands, and every hour that passed made it a more dangerous thing to carry. There was no telling how soon the police would be on her track or to which members of the force she was known. She looked business-like and unremarkable in her dark cloak and hat, and as she quietly took her place in a Passy tram car she glanced through her thick veil at her fellow-passengers with the placid air of a woman who has nothing on her mind. She paid her fare with a coin she had taken from her husband's pocket, and when she got to the Etoile she alighted and walked without hurry to the Trocadero. From there she found her way to a no-man's-land left by the destruction of some Exhibition buildings, a waste area of rubble, bricks, and sand. It took her to a road that gave on the river, and she went close down to the water and saw that at this late hour no one was in sight. She threw the bag as far as she could towards the middle of the Seine. It splashed as it fell, and before the water had closed over it Mme. Varasdin had turned her back and was on her way to the lighted streets again.

Her brain was hard at work all the time trying to follow all the various possible issues of the night's work. If Hyacinth lived and charged her she would defy him to prove his charges. He would have no witness but the cabman, and it was impossible that

he should have seen her features when she engaged him. That Hyacinth should be driving with a nameless woman and that she should have robbed him was of a piece with his life. Mme. Varasdin would have no difficulty in proving that. If he died, the empty bottle and his empty pockets pointed to suicide, to the determined suicide of a nameless and desperate man. The police would make some effort to discover his name and would fail, and he would be buried, and that would be the end of the story.

If Amabel lived, she would charge Hyacinth with assault and robbery, and Hyacinth would have vanished and his injured and deserted wife would not know his whereabouts. If Amabel died, her friends would raise an inquiry perhaps, but Mme. Varasdin could not see that she was in any danger of being connected with it. The girl had been knocked down by a motor car in a low quarter of Paris, and a low crowd had gathered round her, and someone in the crowd had made off with her property. Everyone would believe that had taken place.

Of course, Mme. Varasdin saw that she must not sell the Eugenias yet, and that weeks or even months hence the transaction would be risky and difficult. But with the help of Uncle Joseph she thought it might be managed. She would give him a good commission, and he would sell in one of the big markets. The shares would probably pass from hand to hand as a bank-note does; and it is usually as difficult to trace a bank-note as a coin.

Mme. Varasdin had to ring at the street door to get back into the house, but the concierge was able to let her in without getting out of bed. As she passed his

office she did as M. Varasdin had done and shouted the name of the family that lived above her, a lively family of many members, who all kept more or less late hours. She had to find her way to the lift in the dark and send herself up, and then she went into her dining-room, where the gas was still turned on, and where the glass from which her husband drank was still on the table. And now for the first time her nerve gave way a little. This morning the flat had held a household, and in a day she had rid it of life. She stood here alone with her dishonour and the stakes for which she had played. As she caught sight of her face in a mirror she wondered that anyone could have sat beside her and raised no cry. Hunted and haggard she looked now that the strain was slackening, and no one stood by to see. She felt solitary, she listened to every sound, and her mind began to follow new issues and to scent new dangers. Her eye fell on the empty glass; she took it up and observed a sediment at the bottom. If the police had arrived in her absence they would have seized it, and as she carried it to the kitchen she asked herself whether she had forgotten any other evidence as damning. When she had washed the glass at the sink and sluiced away all traces of the contents, she went back to the dining-room. Her husband had come straight in here to-night, and had gone from here to the street; the things he had taken from his coat were in the Seine, the glass from which he had drunk stood now with other glasses in a pantry cupboard, the brandy went back into the sideboard. If the concierge had seen him come, it did not matter much. His exit with his wife had been unobserved, and so was her

stealthy return. Mme. Varasdin opened a half-bottle of champagne, drank it as she undressed, and fell asleep.

At ten o'clock next day she was out of the house again and on her way to Paris. She would not buy papers at the nearest kiosk and take them upstairs to read, because in Paris you never know with whom your concierge will gossip, or which of your habits he will observe. She walked to the Etoile, got a sheaf of papers there, took a close carriage, and told the man to drive to a registry office at the other end of the town. He started, and she looked eagerly through each printed page, and every paper had two items of news set amongst other tragedies and accidents of the night. One paragraph described three motor-car disasters, the moderate crop of twenty-four hours. A car had dashed down a hill and broken itself and its occupants against the sides of a bridge; a car had frightened the horses in a private carriage; a car had knocked down a young lady and vanished without expressing regret or making inquiries. The young lady lay unconscious at the Hospital of Laborisière, and was not expected to live. Her identity was not known.

The other paragraph described the suicide in a cab of a nameless gentleman of middle age. An empty bottle that had contained a strong solution of morphia had been found beside him. The cabman told a story of a woman with the man and of her disappearance. But the gentleman had not been robbed; a watch and chain of some value were on him and a few small coins. The police were making inquiries, but they had no clues, and they placed no faith in

the cabman's story. The Commissary of Police had ordered the body to be on view at the Morgue for three days for purposes of identification.

The Press did not pay great attention to any of these events. Its space and its talent were engaged that week in chronicling the Mexican Boom. The excitement in London and New York was indescribable, and everyone with a pen was hard at work describing it. The fever had touched Paris too. Women were speculating as wildly as men. Eugenias had rushed up to fifty.

"But it is magnificent. It is worth while," said Mme. Varasdin to herself, and her hand crept to the bosom of her dress, where, for the present, she carried the shares. "If all goes well, perhaps I can sell a little sooner. It would be horrible to keep them for the slump. I will not hide them in the attic just yet. At present I am in no danger, and to rummage in the attic might attract suspicion. When once Hyacinth is buried, the girl may live or die, but she will have no case against me."

XVII

The evening papers added nothing of importance. The suicide had not been identified; the unknown young lady who had been knocked down by a motor car still lay at the hospital between life and death, and unable to give any account of herself. By the following day both cases had been crowded out of the papers. A *crime passionnel*, with lugubrious developments, magnetised the city, and the obscure man, who had so plainly and commonly killed himself, the

unknown girl, one motor-car victim amongst many, were both forgotten. Mme. Varasdin had a new maid-servant in the place of the two she had dismissed, and the concierge was told that mademoiselle had returned to England, and that monsieur, in the kindness of his heart, had accompanied her before proceeding on a business journey.

"Why have they taken no trunks?" said the wife of the concierge.

"People do not always stop for trunks," he said. "Have you observed that madame looks ill and anxious? Monsieur was certainly a charming man, and mademoiselle doubtless found him irresistible. I find it very natural, and madame has the trunks to console her. Let us hope they were well filled. But I do not know what to do with this telegram that has just arrived for mademoiselle."

It was true that Mme. Varasdin looked ill. Every hour increased her sense of security, but it increased her impatience too, and she burned to be gone and gather in the fruits of her daring. Besides, the days were interminable and the nights without peace. If she had felt quite safe, or if she could have shifted her quarters, she thought the strain of waiting would have been slight. But she saw that some inquiry with regard to Amabel might arise at any moment, and that if she could stay and face it, her future position would be stronger than if she yielded to her nerves and fled. And it was not agreeable to spend endless, silent hours in the flat, where every corner and every object accused her. She studied railway time-tables a good deal, and formed her plans carefully. She thought she would stay on in Paris a week or so, and

see anyone who came. Her husband had vanished; Amabel had vanished. That was the story she had to tell. For their fate from the moment she saw them depart together she was not responsible.

She had packed a small handbag with her jewels, her cash, and a few necessaries; and, instead of the indoor gowns she usually wore, she put on every morning now a neat cloth travelling-dress and walking-shoes. The Eugenias she still carried on her person, and her pearls she had sold in the Rue de la Paix. She did not want to start in a hurry and leave her clothes behind her, but she wanted to be ready if the necessity arose. With all her thinking, she could not see every possible issue of a situation that involved several people, one of whom still hung between life and death. Some accident might yet undo her, unless she could get clean away.

The second day had come and half gone, when her new maid burst into the room and, with the fuss and loquacity of the untrained Continental servant, announced that an English gentleman waited at the door and would not be denied. He asked to see an English lady who lived on the flat, and he would not take her assurance that madame lived there alone. Mme. Varasdin had made up her mind that she would probably have Mr Sheringham to deal with, but she had not expected him so soon. As she hesitated, he walked in and made some apology for his intrusion. But his manner was aloof and business-like, and, as the maid shut the door behind her, he asked for Amabel.

"Miss Ferrers left me the day before yesterday," said Mme. Varasdin.

"The day I called here! Why did she leave so suddenly?"

"Why have you come back so suddenly? You bade me good-bye for a fortnight."

"I telegraphed to Miss Ferrers yesterday and received no answer."

"Naturally. She was not here to receive or answer anything, and I cannot help you. I do not know her whereabouts."

"I suppose she left some address for letters."

"Not with me."

"I suppose she went straight to England?"

Mme. Varasdin's hands and eyebrows expressed her ignorance.

"Let me see," she said; "to-day is Friday. It was on Wednesday that you called—on Wednesday that mademoiselle was out all day—running about the streets of Paris, it appears, with Mr Newby. No one can blame me. I had no authority. But it is unfortunate that the young ladies of your country are not more *convenable*, more like French young ladies. Their freedom scandalises us."

"Yes, I know it does," said Mr Sheringham. "But what happened?"

"She returned towards evening, still with Mr Newby, and said she would not spend another night in the house."

"I must see Newby," said Mr Sheringham.

"He is still in Paris, I believe," said Mme. Varasdin.

Something in her tone made Sheringham pause. He saw that, under her bland manner, she was in a ferment. Her eyes shiftily avoided his, sometimes by

looking past him, sometimes by almost hiding beneath her heavy eyelids, and while she talked, her restless fingers were at their old trick, playing now with the toys of her chatelaine and now with her rings.

"And how is M. Varasdin?" said Sheringham. The question was one to mark time. He took little interest in that gentleman's welfare.

"I have no idea where he is," said his wife.

Sheringham's glance measured her again—he saw nothing to trust or esteem. He felt sure she was playing her own game, probably a malevolent game, and he feared lest Amabel should be a pawn on the losing side.

"Where did you last see Miss Ferrers?" he asked.

"At the door of the restaurant where we had all dined with Mr Newby—the day before yesterday?"

"And where did you last see your husband?"

"*Mais—mon Dieu*—at the door of the restaurant. Is it not plain? They departed together."

"Do you want to insinuate that they are together now?"

"You have not known Hyacinth for fifteen years," said Mme. Varasdin, with a sigh. "He is one of those men no woman or girl can resist. His adventures have been like the stars in the sky. I have always forgiven him, but it has not always been easy."

"I may as well tell you that I don't believe a word you are saying," observed Sheringham.

"I can hardly expect you to. Of course, you are very angry; but as time goes on you will believe. Mr Newby will tell you they started together. They have disappeared. They give no sign. Ask Miss Ferrers' friends if she has arrived in England. Ask

at the Ritz, where Mr Newby engaged a room, if she slept there. I have done nothing."

"That is odd," said Sheringham suspiciously. "Why have you done nothing?"

"Because I know my husband," said Mme. Varasdin. "As far as I can I always avoid an open scandal. What should I gain by it? Hyacinth will come back to me."

Mr Sheringham took up his hat and walked to the door, without offering to shake hands with the injured wife. She followed him a little way, and her voice wooed him as he departed.

"Come back and tell me what you discover," she said.

"I may come back—it depends upon what happens," said Mr Sheringham. "But I am quite sure that your story is preposterous. You have probably hidden your husband——"

He was checked by the start and the sudden pallor he saw on Mme. Varasdin's face.

"Hidden him from his creditors," he finished lamely; but as he drove to Mr Newby's hotel, it was the lady's glance as he left her that haunted him.

"She is afraid of something," he said to himself, "badly afraid."

Mr Newby, for a wonder, was in, and expressed his surprise at seeing Mr Sheringham in Paris again so soon. He gave his guest an easy-chair and a cigar, and asked after the Boom.

Sheringham said it was still growing, and that he would be glad of a whisky-and-soda.

"I have just called on Mme. Varasdin," he said, when his friend had rung and given the order.

"I thought of calling there myself this evening," said Mr Newby. "Is she better?"

"She didn't say she had been ill."

"I haven't seen her since the night before last, when we dined together. The truth is, I feel a little bit awkward. You never know how a woman's going to take anything, and as for seeing that there are different sorts in the world, and that you have to conduct yourselves accordingly, it's beyond any woman. But it was a rum start, wasn't it?"

"What was a rum start?" asked Sheringham.

"Oh! haven't you seen Miss Ferrers? I suppose there has hardly been time. When did you leave London?"

"By the early boat this morning."

"Miss Ferrers left yesterday."

"Did you see her off?"

"Unfortunately it was impossible. I was nailed to spend the whole day in Versailles."

A waiter came in with the whisky-and-soda for Sheringham, and until he had gone the two men smoked and waited.

"Can you tell me why Miss Ferrers left Paris in such a hurry?" said Sheringham, when they were by themselves again.

"I—think she got frightened."

"Frightened!"

His voice and his arrested hand showed that he had taken alarm himself. His cigar went out while he listened to what Mr Newby had to say.

"I met Miss Ferrers in the Salon. I took her to the Bois, where she expected to meet you. She told a queer story about Mme. Varasdin going into her

'room at night and stealing her purse. It had upset her a bit, and she said she would return to England next day. I went back to the Avenue Ernani, and something seemed to frighten her there again. A servant she liked had been sent away. So she said she would sleep at the Ritz, and I engaged a room for her."

"You believed her story?"

"Oh yes! Mme. Varasdin spoke of it herself, said she had been sleep-walking. She is a very clever lady, and has a great deal of *je ne sais quoi* about her, but the funny thing in clever people is that they take most of the others for fools. Sleep-walking is too thin. Eugenias are at fifty, and Miss Ferrers had a thousand under her pillow. I didn't want to frighten her——"

He stopped short, because he saw that he had most effectually frightened Sheringham.

"I never thought about those accursed Eugenias," said the great financier. "The girl was carrying a thousand about with her, and these wolves knew it. Is it true that she left the restaurant with Varasdin?"

"He was to see her to the hotel. I had promised to take his wife round the Montmartre theatres."

"We must go to the hotel at once and make inquiries," said Sheringham. "I am uneasy. You don't know, of course. Varasdin has disappeared."

The two men stared at each other.

"Telegraph to England," said Mr Newby.

"Come to the Ritz," said Sheringham, and they got into a cab and drove straight to the Place Vendôme.

The hotel clerk turned over the pages of his ledger and had some conversation with another clerk. He remembered Mr Newby, and the room had been

reserved on Wednesday night for the young lady, but the young lady had not appeared.

"Oh, come!" said Mr Newby, "there's some muddle. You've a lot of people going in and out. A tall young English lady, dressed in grey, and next morning you sent to the Avenue Ernani for her trunks."

"No, they didn't," interposed Sheringham. "The concierge, when he gave me my telegram, said the trunks had never left the house at all. That struck me as suspicious."

"I remember Miss Ferrers," said the clerk. "She was here with Mr Ferrers in the spring. She has not entered the hotel since."

"I don't like it," said Sheringham, and he went aside with his friend and they consulted together.

"She probably went back to London by the night train," said Mr Newby. "Can't you wire?"

"Did she tell you where she meant to stay in London?"

"No."

"Then how can I wire? I'll run over and see for myself, and if I don't find her I'll wire to you to-morrow morning, and then you——"

"But how can you look for her at large in London?"

"It won't be quite at large. I know with whom she would communicate, and there might be a letter waiting for me."

"I feel sure she is in London," said Mr Newby.

"So should I if Varasdin was in the Avenue Ernani," said Mr Sheringham. "Have you anything on to-morrow?"

"Nothing at all."

"Then wait for my telegram. I may want you to go straight to the police."

XVIII

At half-past seven next morning Sheringham knocked at Mrs Hunter's door and explained to the astonished and inquisitive Ginger that he desired to see the cook. Ginger could not understand it, but he understood a little present of five shillings, and in a few minutes Sheringham was shut into the dining-room with Amabel's friend. "'Im as Miss 'Unter is after," they called him below stairs. "A very pleasant gentleman when he *is* pleasant," the cook thought to herself, as she had thought before when they had talked to each other in Bayswater Square. But what she had to tell him only added to his growing uneasiness. She had not heard from Amabel for a month; she knew nothing of her coming to England. On the contrary, in her last letter Miss Ferrers had said she must stay in Paris because her uncle would expect to find her there.

"Do you think if she was in London she would have let you know?" asked Sheringham.

"I feel sure she would, sir," said the cook. "In fact, it was as good as settled. She was to let me know before she came and I was to live with her either as cook or confidential maid, and I said I hoped it would be cook, because I understand that work and don't like the sound of the other. But I agreed to go, sir, the moment I 'eard, and George, 'e's mad to go too. Miss Ferrers is a young lady you're very fond of when you know her."

"Yes, I've noticed that," said Sheringham; and he took up his hat. Then he seemed to change his mind, and put it down again.

"Did you expect to find Miss Ferrers in London, sir?" asked the cook.

"Yes, I did. I am very anxious about her, now that I know she is not here. I suppose you feel quite sure you would have heard from her? You don't think she can be staying at some hotel by herself?"

"I wouldn't reckon on it if I was you, sir," said Mrs Pugsley, anxious herself now. "It's not like Miss Ferrers to say she'd send for me, and then come and never let me know."

"Look here!" said Sheringham, "if Miss Ferrers wanted you in a hurry over in Paris, would you come?"

The cook pondered a little over her reply, before she gave it.

"I might," she said in the end; "I have a sister who obliges."

"What?" said Sheringham.

"My sister goes out obliging, sir. She prefers it. If I went off in a hurry, I'd ask her to do for Mrs 'Unter till she suits herself. Where do you suppose Miss Ferrers to be at present, sir?"

"I wish I knew."

"Isn't she with friends?"

"Who are her friends? Her uncle in Mexico, and you here, and another man and me in Paris. Now, none of us know where she is."

"But she is living with a foreign lady and gentleman she said."

"She is not with them. The trouble is that she had something of great value in her possession."

"You never know what them foreigners will be up to," said Mrs Pugsley; "though, to be sure, we ain't all fit for 'eaven in London either. Would you telegraft to me, sir? My mind will go working round 'orror on 'orror now till I hear Miss Ferrers is safe. And I'll come directly if you want me, though foreign travel and foreign ways is not what I've been used to."

"Bring George to take care of you," suggested Mr Sheringham.

"Rather 'ard on Mrs 'Unter, perhaps," said the cook, and then her voice changed to one of extreme severity. "Not that George would be missed anywhere; 'e's that prying and mischievous," she proclaimed.

"If you please, Mrs Pugsley, can I lay breakfast?" said George at the open door; and Sheringham put two five-pound notes into the cook's hands for her expenses in case he sent for her, and was in his hansom again, and on his way to his office, before Ginger had asked his first question, or had his ears boxed in reply.

Sheringham had managed to communicate with his head clerk, and found that, early as it was, he had arrived at the office and had been busy at the telephone, according to his chief's instructions. He had not been able to hear of Miss Ferrers at any of the large London hotels; and no letter from her awaited Sheringham. At nine o'clock he left for Paris again. Travelling hard made little mark on his strong physique, but his anxiety grew more acute as he reached his journey's end. He had wired to Mr Newby and

hoped to see him at the Nord, and was disappointed. He drove first to the young gentleman's hotel, and heard that he had been out all day and that no one knew when he would return; he drove to his own hotel, and neither letters nor callers had come for him. Then he went out to the Avenue Ernani, and was admitted, and found Mme. Varasdin sitting by herself again, still wearing her quiet cloth gown, and still with a manner that was on guard.

When Mr Sheringham was shown in, she sprang to her feet, and, as he spoke, he saw first alarm and then relief in her face.

"Miss Ferrers is not in London," he said. "I do not know where she is."

She sat down again, and passed a handkerchief over her eyes, and it occurred to him that she had no tears to wipe away, but, perhaps, an involuntary thrill of satisfaction.

"I, too, have discovered nothing," she said. "I sit here with my sorrow—and the days do not come to an end."

"We must see whether the police can help us," said Sheringham.

"They are such bunglers and so meddlesome. The first thing they will do will be to proclaim to all Paris that my husband has forsaken me. That makes it impossible for him to return. Besides, such publicity would be most injurious to Miss Ferrers."

"You are singularly forgiving. I should not have expected you to consider Miss Ferrers—if you believe your own story."

"Can you think of a more likely one?" said Mme. Varasdin.

"I imagine that the police will—when they hear that the girl had fifty thousand pounds' worth of shares in her possession."

The lady blinked, and a moment of tense silence gave emphasis to Mr Sheringham's reply. He had thrown down the glove, and his challenge contained a suggestion she could not pass by.

"Then for once Hyacinth has been clever," she said, deciding neither to resent nor deny the imputation, but to fit it to her purpose. "I am afraid, however, that if he has any money he will not come back to me. I wish I knew where he was."

"Have you taken a single step to find out?"

"The world is large," said Mme. Varasdin. "Where should I begin?"

"He may be in Paris still."

"They may be anywhere."

"Well," said Mr Sheringham, getting up, "my business is to find Miss Ferrers."

"In what way is it your business, if my story is true?"

"You are speaking of my future wife."

"Then it is you who will be singularly forgiving," said Mme. Varasdin.

There was no longer any show of cordiality between them. The man was angry and hostile, and the woman was malevolent and afraid. Her glances had failed to conciliate him or her plight to touch him. He took no pains to hide his doubts of her; he was not held in check for a moment by her appreciation of his qualities, an appreciation she had done her best to convey whenever they met. He was a man she would have followed anywhere, and he had no eyes

for her. From the first she had coveted his favour, and from the first she had failed to win it. He stood here as her enemy, and she feared him, would have struck him dead if she could, would have led him captive if she had known how.

"We are companions in misfortune," she said, with a sigh. "Come and see me again to-morrow. I may have news."

Before Sheringham could reply the salon door was thrown open by the new maid, and Mr Newby walked in. That he brought bad news was plain to both the people he greeted, and they waited with alarm for him to speak. He turned first to the man.

"I got your wire this morning," he said. "I went straight to the police. They've been awfully decent, and we've found out things. Miss Ferrers is alive."

"Good God, I hope so!" said Sheringham. "Where is she?"

"At the Laborisière. She has concussion of the brain and is still unconscious. But they say now she will recover."

"What happened to her?"

"A motor car knocked her down somewhere in Montmartre. How she got so far from the Ritz no one knows yet. She was alone . . . it happened about an hour after she left the restaurant . . . and——"

Mr Newby hesitated, and both men looked at Mme. Varasdin. Her face was grey and shrunken now, and she stared beyond them with horror in her fixed, expectant eyes.

"Go on," said Sheringham.

"Her bag and purse were stolen. Of course, directly the accident happened a crowd gathered."

"But what had become of M. Varasdin?" said Sheringham. "Why was she alone?"

"Poor Varasdin," said Mr Newby.

Mme. Varasdin did not speak, and Sheringham, who was watching her, saw that she could not. He saw the twitch in her throat, and the waiting stillness of her body, and the despair of a creature at bay in her eyes.

"Have you found M. Varasdin too?" said Sheringham.

"Yes, I have," said Mr Newby, in a pained voice.

"Where is he?"

"He is dead. I have just seen him—at the Morgue."

A low, choking groan from Mme. Varasdin checked the young man, and he looked at her helplessly. She was nearer complete collapse of mind and body than she had been at any moment during the last forty-eight hours. In so short a time she would have been safe, safe even if Amabel had recovered and proclaimed the theft of the shares. She could have persuaded the world that her husband had absconded with them, and let the police lead a merry dance in search of him. Her success had hung on the burial of her husband as a nameless suicide, and if Sheringham had stayed away a fortnight, as he said he would, if Mr Newby had not been asked by Sheringham to pry and meddle, her position would have been secure. But the identification of Hyacinth at the Morgue imperilled everything. There would be an inquiry. The cabman would come forward with his story; who could tell what the concierge had seen; and there was the doctor who had pre-

scribed the morphia and knew it to be in her possession. It might never be proved that she administered it; she might face an inquiry and come away scot free. But the shock of the news unnerved her, and to sit there facing those two men, one so obtuse and one so hostile, was more than she could endure. She fell back with hysterical cries, compound of tears and laughter, pitiful to hear.

"I say—where's some brandy?" said Mr Newby. He bolted into the dining-room and returned with a decanter and a liqueur glass. He poured out the brandy and Mme. Varasdin drank it, and in a few minutes she recovered her self-control.

"I will go with you to the Morgue," she said to Mr Newby. "I must see him."

"The police will be here directly, you know," said Mr Newby. "I gave them your name and address. They'll tell you if it's necessary. I should wait if I were you."

"I cannot wait," said Mme. Varasdin. "I must see my unhappy husband. I had always warned him that this would happen. He began years ago . . . began with small doses to relieve pain. I blame myself for leaving him that night. You will remember that we all observed he looked strange."

As Mme. Varasdin talked she was conscious that Mr Sheringham was following what she said with a close, surprised attention that she did not like. She stopped, but he did not speak; she got up, and he made no motion to arrest her.

"I am going to see him at once," she said to Mr Newby; "but I can go alone."

"Certainly not," said Mr Newby. "I will come with you"; and he sat down to wait while she put on her outdoor things. Sheringham waited too.

"I want to know more about Miss Ferrers," he said. "Is she much hurt? Did you hear?"

"Yes, I did. I saw one of the doctors. It's all right, old man. They say she'll pull through now, and be as lively as ever."

"There is a great deal I can't explain," said Sheringham. "Why was she by herself? Who stole her bag and her purse with those shares in it? And there is another thing——"

"What?"

Sheringham did not seem inclined to say. He walked about the room, and Mr Newby stared out of the window, and with both men the time passed slowly. They grew impatient when twenty minutes had been wasted so, and still the lady did not come.

"Mme. Varasdin *is* a long time putting on a hat," said Mr Newby at last. "Perhaps she is ill again, poor thing."

"Ring and ask," suggested Sheringham.

The new maid appeared, and was told that her mistress had had bad news of monsieur, and that she was not well in consequence. The gentlemen would be glad if the girl would ask madame if she still wished to go out with them. The girl went and returned at once.

"Madame is not in her room," she reported.

"Perhaps she is in some other room," said Mr Newby.

The girl went off again and came back again, and had the same tale to tell. Madame was nowhere on the flat.

The two men looked at each other.

"Has she taken offence?" said Mr Newby. "Has she gone to the Morgue by herself?"

"I heard someone go softly into the hall," said the maid. "The front door stands open still. Evidently madame did not wish to attract attention."

"It is very strange," said Mr Newby.

"It is very strange," said the girl, and the men saw she had something more to communicate.

"Well?" they said.

"Madame's travelling-bag . . . the locked one . . . has gone from the wardrobe. Madame has perhaps started on a journey."

Sheringham said something vague, and let the girl go. Then he turned to Mr Newby.

"She's bolted," he said; "she won't go near the Morgue. That was a blind. I should like to know what is in that travelling-bag. And how I'll tell you the other thing that has been going round in my head. What did Varasdin die of?"

"Morphia poisoning."

"She knew it. How did she know it? The manner of his death was not mentioned by you Most people who lie at the Morgue have been drowned She spoke of doses. There has been foul play, I tell you, and she is in it. And she has those shares."

"Good God!" said Mr Newby. "What shall we do next? The police——"

"I'm not going to wait for the police," said Sheringham.

XIX

"I think I shall go to the Morgue," said Mr Newby. "You may be on the wrong tack, and, anyhow, I don't see where else there is to go."

Sheringham hardly heard what his friend said. His eyes were absent, his mind was at work; and when he stirred, it was to ask for a railway book. The two men found one in the dining-room, and it opened with tell-tale ease at the trains travelling towards Vienna from the Gare de l'Est. It was to follow one trail out of many, but to follow it hot, and Sheringham decided to try it.

"Yes, go to the Morgue," he said to Mr Newby; "if you find no one there, perhaps the police will help you again."

The next moment he was out of the room, and out of the flat. As he emerged from the house he held up a twenty-franc piece to a passing cab, and told the driver on what condition he should have it. The man answered to the bribe, and, by favour of fortune, landed his fare undamaged at the railway station five minutes before the Viennese express was timed to start. Sheringham went straight to the booking-office, and asked for a ticket to Nancy. He hoped he would not want it, but he meant to take a journey, if that was the only way. At Nancy there was a halt of a quarter of an hour, and he could book on there if necessary.

When he reached the departure platform, most people who were travelling in that train were either in their seats or standing beside the carriages they

had chosen. A careful glance along the thin scattered groups satisfied him that he knew no one there. Then he got into the train, and walked right to the end of it and back again, and all the while he kept his eyes and ears open for new arrivals. He had entered the first compartment of the hindmost carriage, and had just decided that he was a fool for his pains, when a clanging bell, a whistle, and a scurry on the platform, convinced him that he must instantly jump out or be carried some way from Paris. He cast a cursory glance into the end compartments, found that they were empty, and was making for the door, when he saw through the window the hurrying figure of a tall, thickly veiled lady coming towards the train. He thought he knew her walk, and when she spoke to the conductor he was sure he knew her voice. As the train moved off she settled herself in the compartment adjoining his, and he heard her say that she was going to Vienna.

Sheringham debated with himself whether he should wait, or act at once. He wanted to get back to London. He knew that his head clerk was raging at the chief's not to be understood or forgiven defection in the very midst of a mighty boom in his own market. He wanted also to get back to Paris and Amabel, and watch, hour by hour, for Amabel's recovery. Nothing drew him to Vienna except an outraged sense of justice, but in a man of his temperament that sense prevails. His affairs, which were intricate and of consequence, and his anxiety about the girl he loved, gave way for the time to his conviction that there was a wrong to set right, and that it fell to him to do it. For his purpose an interview without

witnesses was, of course, a prime necessity; and the train had hardly travelled a mile when a dissatisfied passenger spoilt his plan for the time being. A stout, voluble woman came stumping along the corridor in the wake of the conductor, complaining that she had caught her death through an Englishman who would open a window, although she had told him that the night air invariably made people blind. She put her head into Sheringham's compartment, but drew it back when she saw that here, too, sat one of the crazy, draught-loving race. Finally she subsided next door. So Sheringham waited, got his dinner between two stations, and was back at his post before they reached Chalons. He hoped that the stout lady might descend at Chalons, and that he might be saved from travelling further than Bar le Duc, but she disappointed him. Bar le Duc was her destination. From that hour, the train had a clear run to Nancy of more than an hour, and Sheringham said to himself that he would enter on his return journey there, having done what he came out to do. He had been travelling, without much break or sleep, for thirty-six hours, but he had never felt more wide-awake. The thought of Amabel steeled his nerves, and fed his anger, for he believed that she had been robbed and deserted. and that the woman next door had a hand in it. He still waited a little. The train sped through the darkness, the wheels rolled, mile after mile, with a monotonous rhythm, and inside the carriages the hush of night began to replace the clatter and movement of the earlier hours. They were not twenty minutes from Nancy when he left his seat, opened the door of the next compartment,

and closed it behind him, before the woman, half asleep in the corner, roused and recognised him. The noise of the opening door had not terrified her. She expected, when she looked up, to see the conductor. To see Sheringham instead, frightened her out of her self-control. She gave a start, and a betraying cry of surprise, and her right hand, which was ungloved, crept towards something that lay hidden between her body and the cushioned side of the carriage. He was unarmed, and he guessed at once that she was not.

"I want to see both your hands," he said.

She did not move, and through her veil he could see the glitter of her narrow eyes. She looked as cold and wicked as a snake, and he remembered Amabel, and his anger burned within him.

"You can't shoot here, you know," he continued. "You would be arrested at once."

"But you would be out of my way."

"I should do you more harm dead than I mean to do you alive. You had better listen to my terms."

"What do you want of me?"

"To begin with, I want to see your hands."

With a swiftness for which he was not prepared Mme. Varasdin rose and faced him, and the nozzle of the revolver in her steady hand pointed at his heart.

"If you don't go away at once I'll shoot you," she said. "I'll find some story to persuade a French jury. I am a woman. You are an Englishman. I am not afraid. It is your life that hangs on a thread."

But Mme. Varasdin did not understand the hot imperious temper of the man with whom she had to

deal in this hour. Like most foreigners she thought that because an Englishman keeps a rein on his passions he has no passions to rouse, and cannot be moved to any extremity of anger. As she threatened Sheringham his face went white, but it was the pallor of a fiercer wrath and a harder determination than her own. She looked to see him flinch and perhaps to turn ignobly at her command; and before she had time to touch the trigger, he swooped like a hawk towards her and caught both her hands. Without hurry and without violence he forced her fingers from the point of danger and the revolver from her grasp. His luck was with him. Taken by surprise, less resolute than he, and mindful perhaps of her precarious position, she did not struggle much, but stared at him with a sort of sour helplessness as he turned the tables on her.

"If you have a knife I shall take it from you," he said. "You had better sit down." He released her hands and she sank back into the corner of the carriage she had occupied.

"The conductor may appear at any moment," she said sullenly.

"I am not afraid of him," said Sheringham.

"You play a fine part—to bully someone weaker than yourself."

"I warn you that I am not a man of sentiment. I believe you have something in your possession to which you have no right. I believe other things about you too, but on one condition I consent to leave them out of the discussion: in short, as far as I am concerned, to let you go free."

"What is your condition?"

"The bonds that you have stolen. The thousand Eugenias."

"Are you mad? I have no Eugenias."

"I give you ten minutes," said Sheringham. "When the train stops at Nancy the Eugenias will be given up to me, or I shall put you in the hands of the police. I shall charge you with the murder of your husband."

The woman began to tremble violently, and Sheringham began to hate the job he had undertaken. But its unpleasantness did not affect his resolve to see it through.

"I can say I have never seen you before and that you have threatened my life," said Mme. Varasdin. "If I raised my voice the guard would come and the revolver would be found in your possession."

"But the Eugenias would be found in yours," said Sheringham at a venture. He spoke with a bluntness that took the woman aback, and he saw her hand go up to the bosom of her dress and fall to her lap again.

"Anyone can own Eugenias," she said.

"Just as you like," said Sheringham. "We will go to the police together and face inquiry. I trust them to find out when and where you bought this revolver. It was probably on your way to the station."

"I wish I had killed you with it," said Mme. Varasdin.

Her eyes were fixed on the man still standing with his back to the carriage door. She recognised that his fighting spirit was more than a match for her own, and that neither cajolery nor bluster would avail her.

"You have no proofs against me," she said.

"The Eugenias will be found on you. Miss Ferrers will tell us how she came to lose them. I have no doubt that your husband was concerned in it. We shall have to trace his movements from the moment he robbed Miss Ferrers to the moment he entered the cab, dying of morphia administered by you."

"It was a suicide."

"Then how did you know it? No one had told you. Mr Newby said he had seen the body at the Morgue. Most people who lie at the Morgue have died by drowning. You volunteered in our hearing that this was a case of suicide by morphia."

"He told me he meant to do it."

"Say that to your judges—when the stolen bonds have been found in your possession. Explain to them why you did not attempt to identify your husband's body, and tried to put me off with that preposterous story of his elopement with Miss Ferrers. Really, you have not been clever, Mme. Varasdin."

"Nevertheless," said Mme. Varasdin, "if it had not been for you—or if you had been just twelve hours later—— How could I foresee that you would be meddling in what is none of your business? What right have you to interfere? As for the shares, they are no more yours than they are mine."

"But you will give them up to me," said Sheringham.

The train jogged on through the darkness, and presently began to slacken speed. They were approaching Nancy.

"You must make up your mind," he said. "I see the lights of the city. I am going to act the

moment we draw up. I will not be carried on any further."

"Even if I had Eugenias it would be no proof," said Mme. Varasdin, speaking with some violence. "How could you possibly prove that they were stolen from Miss Ferrers?"

Sheringham smiled a little, and he spoke with the quiet assurance of a man who has the game in his hands.

"I suspected you that day in the Jardin des Plantes," he said. "As we were coming home Miss Ferrers showed me the certificate. I took a precaution. I entered the number in a notebook."

That was the last turn of the screw. Mme. Varasdin knew she had lost the game. Yet she bargained as she drew the shares from beneath her cloak; and she still kept them in her hands, as if to give them up was beyond her strength. Her face was white and wicked, and when she spoke she snarled so that her voice sounded in Sheringham's ears like the voice of a trapped beast who would spring at your throat if he could.

"Why should I trust you?" she said. "You will get the shares and then hunt me down."

"To bring you to justice won't bring the poor devil you drugged to life again," said Sheringham.

"I swear I am innocent of that," she cried.

"Here we are," said Sheringham, as the train drew up. "Now! which is it to be? Will you go on to Vienna, or will you break your journey here?"

She threw the paper on the floor at his feet, and he stooped and picked it up. Then he lifted his hat gravely, and turned to go.

"Stay," she said; and he waited, wondering what she could have to say.

"I suppose you think you have done a fine thing," she went on. "You will carry those shares as a love-offering to your bride; and to me and to my fate you will never give another thought. You have taken from me what I risked life and took life to obtain. Oh yes, I killed my husband. I was glad when he died. Do you know what it is to drag through the world with a fool and a knave chained to you? I was free by my own doing. I was rich by my own hands, and you have threatened my freedom and forced my fortune from me. And you do not need the money; neither you nor the girl you love. It is everything to me. For mercy's sake, give me the shares. Give them to me as you would give a crust to a starving dog."

"No," said Sheringham resolutely. "They are not mine to give."

As he spoke he moved more quickly than before from the carriage, for the quarter of an hour had come to an end, and the train was already in motion. He stepped rather hurriedly on to the platform, and did not perceive, in his hurry, that Mme. Varasdin had crept after him. The guard had jumped into his van, Sheringham tried to shut the door of the carriage, a loud-voiced porter ordered him back. By this time he saw Mme. Varasdin close to the open window, and while he turned the handle of the door, she leant out of it, and spoke again.

"Keep that and the shares too, then," she said, and, with her hand covered by the voluminous sleeve of her cloak, she drove a knife into his shoulder.

For a moment he did not realise what had happened, and at first he felt no pain. The rear-light was travelling far down the line, and the officials on the platform were dispersing in various directions, when one of them observed that the tall gentleman who had left the train as it moved out of the station stood very still, and then staggered and fell. The man ran to his assistance.

"Is monsieur ill?" he asked.

"Yes," said Sheringham, and then he fainted.

XX

A week later a cab stopped in front of the Hôtel Ritz, and Mrs Pugsley, attended by Ginger, got out of it. Mrs Pugsley wore a waterproof cloak and a bonnet trimmed high on the crown, and tied under the chin. She carried an old leather bag, and she had brought with her a tin trunk and a portmanteau for Ginger. The hotel porter looked at her doubtfully. Ginger paid the cabman with an English half-crown, and was dancing with delight at the man's gesticulations.

"It's all you'll get, Froggy," he said.

"We want Miss Ferrers," said Mrs Pugsley to the porter.

"Hark at the motor cars," said Ginger, at her elbow; "do you suppose there's a race on? And 'ow quick the Mounseers do talk. I can't make out a word they say. That chap isn't going to take my 'arf-crown. Look at 'im waving 'is 'ands at me. What'll we do?"

"We want Miss Ferrers," said the cook again,

and again the porter signed to her to enter the hotel. He thought there was some mistake, and that she would soon emerge again and be driven to quarters where people who travel with tin trunks are welcome.

"Come on," said Ginger. "'E means we're to ask inside."

He led the way. The journey, short as it was, had brought about a state of things that Mrs Pugsley hoped would not last much longer. Every step in their pilgrimage seemed to leave her more dependent on the boy's counsel, and less capable of dealing with his impudence. He went ahead of her now, and walked up to the clerk's desk and asked for Miss Ferrers.

"Mr Ferrers," corrected the clerk.

"Oh! if you like," said Ginger; "we say miss when it's a young lady. Will you please say Mrs Pugsley is 'ere *and* George. Has Mr Sheringham arrived yet?"

"P'raps 'e'll call 'im miss," he whispered to the cook.

The clerk looked more doubtful than the porter had done, but at that hour the usual waiting-room was empty, and he took the new arrivals there. They looked about them with great interest, and in a few minutes a middle-aged gentleman came in to them.

"Did you inquire for Mr Ferrers?" he said.

"For Miss Ferrers," said the cook, "for Miss Amabel Ferrers."

"Do you know where my niece is, then?" said the gentleman, looking very much surprised.

"I think she must be in a hospital, sir."

"In a hospital? Amabel? Why?"

"Mr Sheringham says so. I had a long telegraft from him day before yesterday."

"What Mr Sheringham is that?"

"A Mr James Sheringham, sir. Isn't he on the Stock Exchange, George?"

"I believe you," said George. "And I've 'eard Mr 'Unter allude to him as Mexican Jem."

"But Mr Sheringham does not know my niece."

"Oh yes! he does, sir," said Ginger. "I see 'im when 'e upset the custard over her at Mrs 'Unter's party."

A light seemed gradually to break upon the puzzled gentleman, and he turned to Mrs Pugsley.

"Are you the cook my niece was so fond of when she lived with Mrs Hunter?" he asked.

"I was Mrs Hunter's cook—until yesterday," said Mrs Pugsley. "Then I got the telegraft from Mr Sheringham, which I'll show you at once, sir."

She took the telegram from her bag, and Mr Ferrers read it.

"Miss Ferrers arrives at Hôtel Ritz, Paris, tomorrow. Recovering from serious illness. Can you be there to receive her? Take George. All expenses paid. Shall arrive Paris soon after you."

"I should say, sir," explained Mrs Pugsley—"I should say that Mr Sheringham had been to see me a week previous, and had told me I might be wanted."

"But why does he arrange things for my niece? And why has she been in a hospital? He explains nothing."

"That is what I found when I tried to answer Mrs 'Unter's questions," said Mrs Pugsley. "'Owever, we've come. My sister's obliging Mrs 'Unter, and 'er son, as is a well-beyaved boy as ever lived, 'as George's place. She won't find as much coal on the stairs as usual, I don't think."

Mr Ferrers said he had been very anxious about Amabel. He had telegraphed from New York, and expected to find her in the hotel on his arrival; but he had received no news of her, and the hotel people had roused his alarm by telling him of her unexplained absence after she had engaged a room. He went out into the hall now to make some further inquiries, and found the booking-clerk engaged with a young gentleman whose face he thought he had seen before.

"I shall return with the lady at once," the young gentleman said, and he brushed against Mr Ferrers as he turned to come away. It was Mr Newby, and he recognised Amabel's uncle directly.

"Well, I am——" he cried. "Won't Miss Ferrers be jolly glad to see you here!"

"You too?" said Mr Ferrers. "Is *everyone* except me looking after Amabel?"

"I'm only doing it by proxy, you know," said Mr Newby. "Sheringham's the man. But as he's been laid up at Nancy—— I say, I've got to find someone Sheringham sent for. She's a cook really, but she's going to take care of Miss Ferrers, and there's a boy too, and they are somewhere loose about the hotel."

"I've seen them," said Mr Ferrers. "I'll take you to them. But just tell me what has been the matter with my niece?"

" She was knocked down by a motor car and nearly killed. Concussion of the brain and complications. She looks a bit off colour still. You must prepare for that."

Mr Ferrers was shocked to hear of Amabel's bad luck, and Mrs Pugsley said the police ought to know better than to allow such things. The whole party drove to the hospital to fetch Amabel, and the two gentlemen went inside and saw one of the doctors. They were told that the girl must still be guarded from all fatigue and excitement, and that it would be unwise to dwell in any way on her accident or the events leading up to it. Mr Ferrers thought it was hard advice to follow, but when he saw Amabel he recognised its wisdom. She looked white and weak still, and her pleasure in seeing him again, and then in seeing Mrs Pugsley and Ginger, was as much as she could bear. Her uncle invited Mr Newby to lunch, and after lunch the two men were sitting with Amabel when a hotel servant opened the door and Mr Sheringham walked into the room. He carried his arm in a sling and looked pale, but not as pale as Amabel. He went straight up to her, and Mr Ferrers watched his niece and drew his own conclusions.

" I had no idea that my niece knew you," he said, when Amabel presented Sheringham to him.

" You called him by some nickname when you said he was banging your market," said Amabel.

Mr Ferrers opened his eyes, and Mexican Jem stroked his moustache and smiled.

" I dropped a hundred thousand in that slump," Sheringham said. " But, of course, I was right at the time. I see Eugenias are at fifty."

"By the way, Amabel, I gave you a few," said Mr Ferrers. "Where are they? I suppose that's a question I may ask you?"

"I haven't got them," said Amabel, and her uncle saw that he had agitated and distressed her. "I have always thought that M. Varasdin took them after he knocked me down."

The three men seemed to speak at the same moment and to come a little nearer to her, moved by horror and surprise.

"If anyone of you had been there!" she said, and she shivered at the memory of that miserable hour. She saw the long, dark, lonely street again—she felt the stunning blow.

"Never mind," said her uncle anxiously—"never mind the Eugenias. If I had known I wouldn't have asked about them."

"But here they are," said Sheringham, who, with his right arm in a sling, had found it difficult to extract the certificate from his coat.

"Hullo!" said Mr Newby. "Then you were on the right tack after all."

"It's as plain as daylight. Varasdin stole them from Miss Ferrers. His wife stole them from him when she had drugged him."

"But how did you get them out of her?"

"I charged her with the murder of her husband."

"Why is your arm in a sling?" asked Mr Ferrers.

"Oh, she had a dig at me with a knife!" said Sheringham. "The Nancy police could get nothing out of me for forty-eight hours, so she got clean away. I don't suppose they will ever find her."

Mr Ferrers said at this point that he had a great

many questions to ask, and he took the two men into his own room and heard all they could tell him of what had happened. None of them doubted that Mme. Varasdin had poisoned her husband.

"It was not suspected here," said Mr Newby. "He was buried as a suicide."

"If she is ever brought to book for it, she will have herself to thank," said Sheringham. "Of course, the police inquired into her attack on me. I had to give her name. I said as little as I could. We can't bring Varasdin to life again, and I should prefer to have done with her."

"I am glad she didn't get off with the shares," said Mr Ferrers admiringly to Mexican Jem. "You really have been a first-rate friend to Amabel."

"Well, that's only natural," said the financier, and there and then he explained why.

"But I looked forward to settling down in New York and having her to keep house for me," said Mr Ferrers.

"I'll ask her to keep house for both of us in London," said Sheringham, and he went off to Amabel and found that she had been resting, and felt the better for it.

"But I dream of it," she said nervously. "I see the long dark street and his face. The motor car comes and I can't escape. He is dead. I hope I need never see her again. Suppose she went to New York and I came across her there?"

"I know a certain way of avoiding that," said Sheringham; "marry me and live in London."

"I wonder whether Uncle Michael would like it?" said Amabel, when her lover had softened the bluntness of his proposal by explaining at some length and

in the usual way how ardently he desired her to accept him.

"We will invite him to live with us," said Sheringham. "To tell the truth, I have done it already."

"Did you feel so sure of me?" said Amabel rather wistfully.

"Not of you so much as of myself from the first moment I saw you. And when a man sets his heart——"

"When Mexican Jem sets his mind, you mean——"

"But I did feel sure of you too," said Sheringham. "I felt sure from the moment I met you in old Gregorio's ballroom. You may deny it if you will, but you looked delighted to see me."

"So I was," admitted Amabel.

"Then there is nothing more to be said," observed Mexican Jem.

But they found a great deal to say, until Mrs Pugsley and Ginger came into the room to bring Amabel some tea made with the help of an English tea-basket.

"Miss Ferrers and I are going to be married," said Sheringham very soon to Mrs Pugsley. "We shall want a cook."

"*And* a under footman," said Ginger.

"And a best man," said Sheringham to Mr Newby, who appeared with Mr Ferrers just then.

"And someone to give you away, my dear," said Amabel's uncle.

"Let us be married to-morrow," said Mr Sheringham.

"I have no clothes," said Amabel.

"But you have a thousand Eugenias and one uncle," said Mr Ferrers.

"And you have two trunks," said Mr Newby. "I forgot that. I explained about them to the police, and they are awaiting your instructions at the Avenue Ernani."

"Shall I go and fetch them, sir?" said Ginger, and he was allowed to do so.

"Of course, it can't really be to-morrow," said Sheringham. "At least I should think not. As British subjects abroad there would be formalities."

"Of course it can't be to-morrow," said Amabel. "How can you have a wedding without a wedding gown?"

"And a wedding cake," said Mrs Pugsley.

"Are there no gowns and cakes in Paris?" said Sheringham.

"There may be gowns," said Amabel.

"But no cakes," said Mrs Pugsley. "I have often been told that foreigners get married without them."

"I must really go back to London," said the bridegroom. "I don't want to find myself bankrupt on my wedding day."

"I would give you the thousand Eugenias," said the bride.

"You shall go back to London to-morrow," said Mr Ferrers. "The doctor shall fix the date of our return, the milliners shall fix the date of the wedding, and you, Mrs Pugsley, shall fix the height of the cake."

"I'm glad we're going back to London," said Mrs Pugsley. "I've heard a deal of French cooking all my life, and now I've tasted it, and I don't deny it has points, which is more than I can say for the meat.

Of course, they can cook. With old cab-horse for beef, they'd die if they didn't."

"I shall go back to London, too," said Mr Newby. "I look forward to a grilled steak myself."

"Never mind milliners and doctors," said Amabel. "We'll all go back to-morrow."

"I call that a sensible remark," said Mexican Jem.

SIMPLE ARITHMETIC

My only sister Laura is a most excellent girl, but she bears me a grudge. It is such a pity. When I last saw her a year ago I found that she still felt a little sore because I married John Davenant. Yet for both my mother and me the marriage was a fine thing, and the family consists of my mother, Laura, and me. It is just as if Laura was mentally deficient and could not do a sum in simple arithmetic. I said so to John the other day, but he did not see my point. He said that Laura was a brick and had an adjectival hard time of it. I am not sure that a married man ought to think any woman except his wife a brick. Besides, I don't know what he means, for Laura leads a sheltered life in a red cottage covered with creepers. The lawn is like velvet, and there is no one to entertain except the vicar and his wife and an elderly curate. Now I have lived in a whirl ever since my marriage, and I took antipyrine five times last week or I could not have stood it. I know Laura doesn't take antipyrine from one year's end to the other. But even John often fails to understand me. I found that out before the end of the honeymoon.

Of course, Laura was engaged to John when I had

to come home from Italy because Blanche Chesterton suddenly said she wanted her husband to herself. I had been travelling with the Chestertons for weeks, and he and I had the same taste in poetry and music. He played the violin and I accompanied him better than his wife did. But all women have petty minds. That is why I cannot get on with them. Even Laura has turned out a disappointment.

I was rather surprised to find her engaged when I got home. Laura is not the kind of girl to turn a man's head in an afternoon and have to refuse or accept a proposal of marriage at the end of a two hours' acquaintance. That has happened to me more than once, and it is exhilarating, especially when you temporarily accept the man. But it must have taken time to court Laura, and how John managed it is still a mystery. He shuts up like a hedgehog if I ask him, and I hate bristles.

You see, Laura hardly ever gets out of the house because my mother misses her when she is away; and no one new ever enters the house because my mother does not like strangers. I assure you it was not gay at home when I went off to Italy with the Chestertons. Mother was always in bed or in an arm-chair or in a close carriage, and she never could see you without mentioning that she felt depressed. I used to tell her it was all fancy, and then she would ask me to call Laura and go away myself. I was glad enough to go away. There is nothing much the matter with mother. She has picked up wonderfully since my marriage. If Laura was really unselfish she would recognise this and feel glad that John turned to me and left her at home.

It seems there was a fine fuss when Laura said she wanted to marry John Davenant. It meant going out to India with him, and mother naturally would not hear of such a thing. They were absurd enough to think she might accompany them and to suggest it. Mother considered that most unfeeling, and told John about the way her headaches come on whenever the thermometer at her elbow goes above 70°. She said no one but the doctor and Laura understood her constitution, and that a removal to India and a separation from her daughter were equally impossible. However, Laura stuck to her man, and when I got home she told me first thing that she wanted me to look after mother for a week while she went to stay at the Abbey and make old Lady Davenant's acquaintance.

"H'm," I said, "it's a long journey to take two days running, and you know mother will telegraph for you to come back before you arrive."

Laura flared up. She has a very quick temper, poor dear. She seemed to think I might keep mother amused and pacified just for once, and she reminded me that I had just had six weeks' holiday. I told her my nerves were shattered by Blanche Chesterton's tantrums and that my clothes were all worn out, but she was not a bit sympathetic.

"If you won't promise to look after mother I must tell John I can't go to the Abbey," she said. "He is coming to dinner to-night."

"Is he?" I said, and I put down a crumpled muslin I had in my hand and took up my white crêpe de chine. I wanted to make a pleasant impression on John and do Laura credit.

When I was ready I found a volume of Browning

and went out into the garden. I read about the thrush in his first fine careless rapture, and then I shut my book and listened to a nightingale and felt at peace with all the world. When I saw a young man coming across the grass I guessed it was Sir John Davenant. I rather hoped he would pass me by, and I even took the trouble to avert my head.

But it was of no use. He came close up to me and said "Laura" in a regular lover's voice, and then he saw that it was not Laura; and he looked, and looked; I thought he would never have done looking.

"There is a likeness," he said, when I had explained myself.

"Do you think there is?" said I.

Just then Laura came into sight, and she had put on a black silk made by a local dressmaker. Now everyone who understands anything about clothes knows what can be done with black silk or blue serge by a local dressmaker. My sister was disfigured.

"I thought there was a likeness," said Sir John, and he glanced from one to the other.

Then we went into dinner, and Laura sat opposite mother with her face to the light. That was unlucky, for she had been midge-bitten on the river the day before. I just mention these little things because I am sure they affected coming events and permit me to have a clear conscience.

I certainly sent away a stupid tall glass of flowers that stood between John and me. I hate talking to a man I can't see, and I had to talk a good deal. John had been in Italy, the others had not, and I was full of Italy. Laura might have joined in more than she did, but she was so silent that at last John noticed it

and asked if anything was the matter. Of course I knew exactly how Laura felt: a little out of humour about her dress, bothered, too, by the sun in her eyes and the spots on her face, and all of it getting worse every minute. It was a relief when mother had given the pugs their biscuits and rose from table.

"It is much too fine to sit indoors," I said; "I shall go into the garden and listen to the birds."

I am dreamy and romantic by nature, at least so the men who fall in love with me say. I suppose that is why the real world jars on me. There is something so selfish and inconsiderate about real people compared with the music of *Tristan und Isolde*, for instance. The one pleases you and the others are always wanting you to please them, and feel injured when you don't. The great composers reach the heights my soul reaches and rouse the emotions I most enjoy. My fellow creatures ruffle me, at least most of the women do. My mind was pursuing these ideas when John Davenant walked across the lawn again. He said in a half-apologetic way that Laura was playing patience with mother and that he had come out to smoke. I got out my own cigarette case and we strolled to the top of the hayfield and looked at the view and the moon. It was very peaceful. But when we went back to the house mother had gone to bed and Laura said she had been hunting for us all over the place. I thought she seemed rather annoyed.

On the following afternoon Laura went for a drive with mother and I remained at home. John came and stayed two hours. I found he had a voice, so we tried a few duets together. Then we had tea in the garden and talked about India. I did not ask him to find me

in the hayfield after dinner. I may have mentioned that I usually went there to see the moon rise, but how could I guess that he wanted to see the moon rise too? Next day we met by accident on the river. I was in a boat and he was fishing, but he put up his rod when he saw me. Things went on in this way for nearly a week. I happened to see a great deal of John, and Laura hardly saw him at all. At the end of the week mother had one of her "attacks." It is no use asking for a more definite description. We always talked of mother's attacks, and when one came on she employed Laura night and day and most of the servants too. I could hardly get dinner properly put on the table, and though John asked for Laura whenever he came to the house, he invariably had to see me instead. We could not have music because it disturbed mother, so we sat about the garden or the hayfield.

One night we went back to the house later than usual and found Laura waiting for us in the drawing-room. She had never done this before, and I think it was unfair of her to surprise us. We went in by the low French window and I stumbled on the step, and as John saved me he caught me in his arms and kissed me. It was the first time, and we had no idea that Laura saw. When she came forward we were horrified, at least John was. I thought the best thing I could do was to leave the engaged couple to themselves, so I strolled along the drive as far as the front gate and stood there looking at the stars.

In about ten minutes John came tearing across the gravel, and I believe he would have gone past me without speaking if I had let him. Of course I knew better.

"Good night," I said.

"Good night," said he.

"Are you coming to-morrow?"

"I am never coming again. Laura has sent me about my business."

"That's mother's doing," said I.

"Do you think it is?" he said, as if the idea relieved him. "Laura didn't say so."

"What did she say?"

"Said she would not go to the Abbey next week; said you had better go instead."

"You told her that was impossible, of course."

"I didn't; I said it was a good idea. You see, we both lost our tempers."

I laughed a little and then I tried to console him, because I saw that he was uneasy in his mind and there was really no need for it. I told him all about Bobby Armiger. He is a much better match than John, because he is Lord Robert Armiger, and may be the Duke of Thistles. At present, too, when he is not in South Africa, he lives just across the road.

"It is all for the best," I assured him; "mother never would have let Laura marry you."

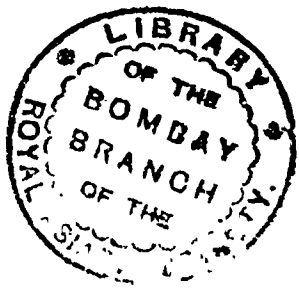
"Do you think she would mind if you did?" he said, and I saw that he was twiddling a diamond ring between his thumb and his finger. Laura, of course, had just given it back to him. I showed it to her next day.

"I'm going to the Abbey next week," I said, "and as you have given him up I am going to marry John. I hope you won't be vexed about it. He and I are very happy, and mother will rejoice. So if three people out of four are satisfied——"

But Laura did not see it at all. She said it was not a case of simple arithmetic. She said other things as well; and, if you can believe it, she refused to come to our wedding. I think she must feel rather ashamed of herself now.

. . . . . .

The English mail has just arrived. There is a letter from Laura and she is engaged to Bobby Armiger. I knew I had acted for the best.


LIBRARY OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ROYAL

LOVE IN A MIST

A Drawing-room on the ground floor of a house at Wimbledon. MRS EGERTON *is sitting by the fire. On a table close to her chair there is a movable electric light and some new books and magazines. Although it is only four o'clock the curtains are drawn and the lights switched on. Outside there is a dense fog and ten degrees of frost. Inside, the thermometer stands at sixty, the fire is piled with logs, and the room is gay with spring flowers from the Riviera. The* PARLOUR-MAID *brings in tea and retires. A bell is heard. A moment later* MAJOR BELLWOOD *is announced and ushered in.*

Mrs EGERTON. You!

Major BELLWOOD. Why not?

Mrs E. Have you forgotten that it is my "day"?

Major B. No. I remembered it with annoyance. But this fog is like a nightmare. I considered how I could shake it off. I thought of you and your room looking—well, just like this. I knew I should find you here, and I know that no one else will come this afternoon.

Mrs E. Why not.

Major B. Have you looked outside?

Mrs E. I did this morning. Then I drew the curtains and turned on the light.

Major B. (*drawing his chair closer to the fire and to* Mrs EGERTON). It seems evening in here—a comfortable winter evening.

Mrs E. (*maliciously*). I am sure to have callers this afternoon. People will come and wish me a Happy New Year.

Major B. I wish you one. I shall make off the moment I hear the bell.

Mrs E. Why?

Major B. I don't want to talk about the weather to a dozen people I have never seen.

Mrs E. Oh! if your talk is at that level—— Do you suppose that my friends and I discuss the weather?

Major B. I am sure you do. And the fashions and the play, and the last new novel. Oh! and crinoline.

Mrs E. Well! You needn't sneer. What do you talk of at the clubs? Scandal, the music-halls, and last night's debate. I don't see much to choose, myself. Have some tea?

Major B. Thanks. (*He takes a cup of tea and refuses cake. Just as he is going to drink, a bell rings. He puts his cup down and gets up.*) I'm off! (*He stands about uneasily. They both listen.*)

Mrs E. I don't hear anyone.

Major B. There was a bell.

Mrs E. It may have been the milk. I often see it arrive about this time.

Major B. (*sitting down again*). I am sure no one will come in this fog—right out here too.

Mrs E. I am quite surprised that you did.

Major B. Oh! I'd come any distance to see you.

Mrs E. Thanks. (*Pause.*) I met Miss Lightfoot yesterday.

Major B. (*indifferently*). Did you?

Mrs E. She looked so pretty.

Major B. I haven't seen her for an age. (*A silence.*)

Mrs E. You seem out of spirits.

Major B. I am.

Mrs E. (*flippantly*). Confide in me.

Major B. Just what I want to do, but—well, I will. The fact is, I hear that you—— There's that bell again! (*He gets up and stands about the room. Someone is heard at the front door.* MRS EGERTON *takes up a peacock-feather screen, and holds it between herself and the fire. The* MAID *comes in with a telegram, which she presents to her mistress. She waits while* MRS EGERTON *opens it, is told there is no answer, and goes away again.*)

Mrs E. (*absently*). What were you saying?

Major B. Oh! nothing that matters.

Mrs E. This telegram is very annoying.

Major B. So I see.

Mrs E. It is from Mr Cohen.

Major B. Just like him.

Mrs E. (*surprised*). What is like him?

Major B. Oh! anything he does. What business has he to telegraph to you?

Mrs E. He promised to buy me some Chatawunga Reefs, and he wires to say that they went up with a rush before he got to the City. So he left them alone.

Major B. I don't see what a lady *wants* with speculative shares like that. It's just like Cohen, to think that everyone must be as greedy about raking in a pound or two as he is himself.

Mrs E. A pound or two! If I had only met Mr

Cohen twenty-four hours sooner, I should be a thousand pounds richer this afternoon.

Major B. What good would it do you? You couldn't make your room any prettier—or your gown —or yourself. Do you mean to say that when Cohen took you in to dinner the other night he talked about mining shares?

Mrs E. He is a very amiable, enlightened man, and a great favourite of mine. He doesn't talk *down* to women, as most men do.

Major B. You mean he doesn't screw himself up. He stops at his own level—a pretty low one! If that's what you like——

Mrs E. I hate that way of talking—your way, I mean—as if women ought to be shut up in glass cases, and approached with smirks and pretty-pretty speeches! In these days we expect to be addressed as equals.

Major B. (*gets up, puts down his cup*). Come along, old chap, then. Let's dine in town and look in at the Empire afterwards. Kate Bangles gets there about eleven, and sings——

Mrs E. Have you quite taken leave of your senses?

Major B. You *are* difficult to please this afternoon. (*Pauses.*) There's that confounded bell again!

Mrs E. Please not to use such an expression in my hearing. (*They both listen.*) Oh! I know. They are ringing upstairs to tell my maid to come down to tea.

Major B. I should hate a house where you hear all the bells and never know which they are.

Mrs E. I'm very fond of this house. I've lived in it for five years.

Major B. (*sighing*). How time flies!

Mrs E. And leaves its mark. What a talent you have for pretty speeches!

Major B. You made that one. I have one to make, but it isn't pretty.

Mrs E. Think before you speak, then.

Major B. I've done that—and I've made up my mind to risk it.

(MRS EGERTON *takes up the fan again and gazes at it intently. Her face is turned towards the fire, so that* MAJOR BELLWOOD *can only see her hair and the tip of one ear.*)

Major B. I expect you'll turn me out of the house when I've done. (*She smiles, and he goes on rather nervously.*) I feel such an officious beast—and yet—you know you're a very lonely woman, Mrs Egerton. You have a thousand acquaintances——

Mrs E. And no friends. Thanks. Another pretty speech!

Major B. I don't mean that, of course. But you've no men-folk belonging to you, don't you know.

Mrs E. Can't say I miss them.

Major B. Perhaps not. But what I mean is that no one has the right to say a word.

Mrs E. (*with emphasis*). No one.

Major B. All the same, I'm going to. You've got no brothers.

Mrs E. *Do* I need you to tell me that?

Major B. (*staring fixedly at his shirt-cuff*). If you had brothers they would not approve of your marrying Cohen.

(*A long pause. At last* MAJOR BELLWOOD *gets up. He looks distressed and uncomfortable.*)

Major B. Good-bye, Mrs Egerton.

Mrs E. Good-bye, Major Bellwood.

Major B. I hope you forgive me.

Mrs E. (*with sudden anger*). I never will. I shall remember to my dying day that you have dared to come here and speak in this impertinent way. For the first time since my husband died I have felt what it is to have no men-folk belonging to me, as you put it. No other man has ever made me feel it. You may be sure that you never shall again.

Major B. You know as well as I do that I am incapable of an impertinent thought about you.

Mrs E. I don't. You are full of horrid, out-of-date notions about women. You seem to think that because you're a man—— What business is it of yours? If I choose to marry a crossing-sweeper can you prevent me?

Major B. Unfortunately not.

Mrs E. I call it rather mean to blacken a man's character behind his back.

Major B. I'll tell Cohen my opinion of him with all the pleasure in life if it will do any good.

Mrs E. What do you know about him?

Major B. Much that I don't intend to repeat to you.

Mrs E. (*scornfully*). Oh! because I'm a woman, I suppose!

Major B. Exactly.

Mrs E. One might as well be a wax doll as a woman in some men's society.

Major B. I shouldn't so much mind telling a wax doll.

(*They have both risen, and are staring angrily at each other. A bell rings. They start, and walk a few steps*

in opposite directions. Voices are heard in the hall. The PARLOUR-MAID *comes in with a salver, on which there is a small collection-card.*)

PARLOUR-MAID. Please 'm, will you contribute anything to the Putney and Wimbledon Chimney-Sweeps' New Year's Tea? You gave half a crown last year.

(MRS EGERTON *looks for her purse and cannot find it.* MAJOR BELLWOOD *takes a coin from his pocket and gives it to the* PARLOUR-MAID. *She goes.*)

Mrs E. (*stiffly*). I owe you half a crown, Major Bellwood. (*She crosses the room, sits down in front of a writing-table, opens a drawer and takes out a purse. Then she suddenly buries her face in her hands and bursts into tears.*)

Major B. Good heavens! Why are you crying? What is the matter? What have I done?

Mrs E. Oh! nothing.

Major B. But you are crying. You do care for him, then?

(*She turns impatiently away from him, and at the same time offers him her purse.*)

Mrs E. Take your half-crown. I can't find it now.

Major B. Never mind the half-crown. Come back to the fire and talk again.

Mrs E. There is nothing more to be said.

Major B. Then you are going to mary Cohen? What!!! (*He tries to get hold of her hand.*) Why are you crying?

Mrs E. Because you are so stupid.

Major B. (*thoughtfully*). Oh! Do you always cry when people are stupid?

(*They stand for a moment with clasped hands. A*

bell rings. They start asunder. The PARLOUR-MAID *brings in another telegram, and waits to see whether there is an answer.*)

Mrs E. (*reading*). "Chatawunga Reefs going up fast. Another rise expected to-morrow. Shall I buy?" What shall I say?

Major B. Say No. Here—let me fill up a form for you. (*He does so. Gives it to the* PARLOUR-MAID. *She goes.*)

Major B. (*with satisfaction*). There's an end of Cohen, I hope. He will understand your No.

Mrs E. I am not sure. Men are so dense.

Major B. That's a dig at me, of course. It is not deserved. If you say Yes, I shall hear and I shall understand. (*He takes her hands in his again.*) Is it Yes?

Mrs E. If you were not abnormally dull you might have guessed that it would be an hour ago.

Major B. But you were so angry with me less than an hour ago.

Mrs E. I should think so!

Major B. Why?

Mrs E. Oh! I might spend my life in explaining. You would never see. Do you know that you have lost me a thousand pounds?

Major B. Well, I can hardly say I'm sorry.

ON THE BALCONY

"THE music stops. Our dance is over, then, and we must go in."

"Can't you spare one more? We have had so few together."

"Five waltzes, two polkas, and the Barn Dance! And I don't even know your name?"

"Oh! I'll tell you my name if you'll give me another dance."

"Well?"

"William Burne. This next waltz and the Lancers. One for each name."

"You take too many."

"By the way—Smith mumbles his introductions so absurdly—what is your name?"

"What have you put on your programme—eight—nine—ten times?"

"Would you like to see?"

"Oh! I don't care much."

"Of course, I had to invent a name."

"I hope it was a flattering one!"

"Rather."

"I should like to see it, then. How badly you write! I can't make it out. These Chinese lanterns

give no light. H. E. R. Does that stand for three words ? "

" It stands for you."

" H. E. R."

" Can't you spell words of three letters ? "

" Oh ! How stupid ! "

" I am stupid ! Born so. You have not told me your name yet."

" May Anderson."

" Anderson ! Not any relation to Zedekiah Anderson, who used to live at Wimbledon ? "

" Only his daughter."

" What ! My father and he have quarrelled."

" When ? "

" Five or six years ago. Home Rule, of course. It's irreparable. Do you still live at Wimbledon ? "

" We live next door."

" Next door ! Why, I'm staying here for a week."

. . . . . .

" Good evening. Are you often out on the balcony by moonlight ? "

" No. I am reading a book about astronomy, and I came out to look at the stars."

" I know the constellations. I'll tell you their names. That's the Great Bear."

" Well, go on."

" You have learned enough for one night."

" I don't believe you know any others. What did you come out for ? "

" I am reading a book about the moon."

" Oh ! "

" How odd it is that you should live next door to the Smiths ! "

"Why?"

"Well, it seems odd, somehow. I wish I might call at your house."

"I wish your father and mine had not quarrelled."

"Why?"

"It is so wrong to be bad friends with people."

"Let us try and make peace between them."

"How? Oh! Good night."

. . . . . .

"Why did you run away in such a hurry last night?"

"It got so cold."

"Is that why you have put on that fur cloak? How pretty it is!"

"I shall not come out here after dinner again. To-night I had two reasons——"

"I only had one. I hoped to see you."

"Nonsense. I wanted to see Orion and to say good-bye."

"To Orion?"

"To you."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh! nowhere. But I don't suppose we shall ever speak to each other again, and I ran off rather abruptly last night."

"You did."

"It was your fault."

"Why are we never to speak to each other again?"

"How can we, when our fathers are not friends?"

"The point is, are we friends?"

"Oh! yes. I don't mind you. But you must see that I can't come and talk to you on the balcony again."

"Are you sure you don't mind me?"

"I like you better than Mr Parsons."

"Who is he?"

"Mother and father are very fond of him. He dined with us to-night. I shall have to go in directly and play to him."

"I wish I could kick him!"

"You needn't look so savage. He has done you no harm."

"Hasn't he? If your father and mother have fixed on him for a son-in-law——"

"How you do jump ahead! There! I can hear them calling me. I must go in and play."

"I shall stay out here and listen. I shall fancy that you are playing to me."

"What shall I play?"

"A fugue of Bach's for Parsons, the Moonlight Sonata for me."

. . . . . .

"I have been out here more than an hour."

"I did not mean to come again. But that book about the stars—if my mother saw us here, what should I say?"

"That you had just promised to marry me, of course."

"Oh! impossible — when our fathers are not friends."

"That is what makes it so necessary."

"I thought you were a determined old bachelor."

"So I have been for twenty-six years. Then I saw you."

"I meant never to marry. I said so only last night."

"So Parsons proposed to you. What cheek!"

"Well—if it comes to that, you don't even visit at the house."

"I am coming to see your father to-morrow."

"Good night."

"Good night, May—Burne."

. . . . . .

"What shall we do?"

"Run away together."

"Oh, no! I shouldn't like that."

"Why not?"

"No cake—no bridesmaids—no trousseau."

"But if your father won't consent——"

"He will if your father will apologise."

"How can he when he was not in the wrong?"

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"I'm afraid my father may, though."

"Are you like him?"

"So people say."

"Then I will send him my photograph."

"He will be charmed."

"I hope so. Then you must persuade him to come here."

"Well, I'm not sure; it would be easier to run away. We could be married by special license."

"Nonsense!"

. . . . . .

"I've fixed it at last, but it has been a job, I tell you, May. Those two old buffers——"

"For shame, Will. I won't have my father called an old buffer. How did you get round them?"

"Well, I tackled my governor first. Showed him

your photograph, and persuaded him to come here with me to-night."

"I was so startled when you were announced. What did you say to my father?"

"I said you had set your heart on bridesmaids and white satin, and was Mr Anderson going to let his only child be married in tweed, and given away by a pew-opener?"

"Is that the way you ask a man's consent?"

"No. Your father had refused his consent. I came to warn him of our intentions."

"They never were mine, Will."

"So your father said. I did not contradict him, of course, but I looked incredulous. Then my father assured yours that you and I meant to be married somehow. Why not let bygones be bygones, and turn their attention to settlements? So they shook hands."

"You talk as if it had all come right at once. But it is more than an hour since you came."

"It is more than a month since Mr Anderson dismissed me. Some people would have lost heart."

"What should we have done without this balcony? You need not stay with the Smiths now and talk to me over the railing."

"Have you finished your book about the stars?"

"No. Have you finished yours about the moon?"

TRAVELLING COMPANIONS

" LAST winter," said Angela, " I took Edward to Italy." I have to put it this way about, although my grandmother will consider it unbecoming. But you know Edward. He never wants to do anything but write incomprehensible books, play chess, and grow white foxgloves. However, he is what my grandmother calls an indulgent husband, and when I asked him if he would go to Rome he looked up with the patience of a primitive saint and said :

" If it comes to the worst ! "

That was enough. I made my plans, and by the end of October brought matters to a crisis. I let our cottage and the garden and next year's white foxgloves.

" On the 4th we must clear out," I said, a good ten days beforehand.

" I can't possibly be ready by then," he objected.

" Why ? What have you to do ? "

" Thousands of things . . . all those foxgloves to transplant . . . how long do you want to stay away ?"

" You know as well as I do, Edward, that we have let the cottage for six months."

He did not speak, but he looked the picture of

misery. Poor Edward! Last time we went to London for a week I asked him on the third day if he had a temperature, because his voice and manner suggested suffering, and he said patiently:

"No . . . no . . . my dear, . . . but I do wish I was allowed to live in my happy home."

So you see I needed some faith and courage to drive him out of it for half a year, and many a time before we started I had qualms.

"We shall have to enjoy ourselves a great deal to make up for this," he said, looking at all his dear possessions unearthed from their hiding holes and lying in manly disorder, mostly on the floor.

"We must leave drawers and cupboards empty for our tenant," I said for the twentieth time, and urged on his packing. I could not pack for him. All the king's horses and all the king's men could not do that for him, because the wisest of them would never take all he wanted. Once when we arrived at a Cumberland farmhouse I found a length of gaspipe in his trunk. I forget what he needed it for, and, to tell the truth, I doubt whether his choice is always governed by need. Why did he bring a fisherman's jersey to Leipzig and a football cap to Oberammergau? But he says he has a system.

Like other men, Edward enjoys a map and time-tables. Once when he was ordered to the South of France we spent a whole winter in Falmouth with a Continental Bradshaw. There was not a train between Marseilles and Biarritz that we did not know, and we spent whole evenings trying to decide whether or not we would halt at Carcassonne. But as Falmouth did all that was wanted we never went to the South of

France. Our path to Rome was to be by Munich, where we wanted to see friends, and Edward decided that we should leave Charing Cross at night and travel straight through. Would you be glad or sorry if you strung yourself up to cross the Channel in a violent storm and found it like a mill-pond? Directly we got to Calais I propounded this problem to Edward, and was rather annoyed when he said it wasn't a problem, because no one in his senses could be in doubt about the answer.

"People in their senses are people without understanding," I said. "Don't you know, Edward, that there is such a thing as summoning all your powers of endurance and feeling flat when you find there is no call on them?"

He didn't answer because he was trying to tell five men in blue blouses that he had no use for them, and I let the discussion drop because I had arrived in Arden and was content. Home may be the better place, but how are you to know it if you never go to Arden? On looking back I perceive that nothing except perhaps the temples at Paestum gave me a more lasting joy than the lights of Calais harbour and the glooms of Calais station. As the horns blew and the train moved we knew for the first time that we were on the way to Rome. Between waking and sleeping we stopped at little wayside stations and looked out to see toy town houses and foreign men who spoke in a foreign tongue. When dawn came we were amongst those Flemish pastures known to us since childhood through Hobbema and Ruysdael, and by noon we were on the banks of the Rhine. Many a time we had seen the old river, but we saw it at its best on this fine winter

morning, when a few leaves still fluttered from the trees and gleams of pale sunshine lighted the roofs and belfries on either shore. In Munich we found snow and the snow shovellers by night and day. What it must cost the merry city to keep its streets clean when winter begins so early and ends so late each year! But the people of Munich walk to and fro in snow without umbrellas, some bareheaded, and all unconcerned. We had the good luck to be there at full moon, and see it shining on the empty, silent market-places of the city, and on the busy traffic that lasts for a few minutes when the doors of the great opera-house lets out the crowd. When we went into the opera the streets had been swept, but when we came out the snow was inches deep again.

My patron saints in Munich are Wagner and Albrecht Dürer, but where there are so many saints every man to his choice. I soon found that Edward's shrine would be the Deutsches Museum. By fraudulent representations he enticed me there one afternoon, and I stayed there with him three never-to-be-forgotten hours. My favourite critic says the art of marriage is the difficult art of companionship, and so in a terse sentence he unravels the problem over which most of us pour buckets of words and cheap philosophy. His dictum was in my mind when I agreed to spend one of our few precious mornings with Edward at the Deutsches Museum. He burned to show me its glories, and assured me my interest in them would be as keen as his own.

Edward bears no resemblance to Mr Barlow in *Sandford and Merton*. He never preaches, and he hates prigs worse than I do. But though we

practise the difficult art with considerable pleasure to ourselves, our minds work on different planes, and much that he enjoys is denied to me. Of course the contrary holds good. I once made him come with me to an Ibsen play, but I didn't make him stay to the end of the first act. When I tell the whole story to Prunella she says that it proves that men have no souls. But Edward has any amount of soul for white foxgloves and fishing-tackle, and I am sure he would not say that Prunella has no soul because she does not care for either. However, he did over-estimate my intelligence (let us put it that way) when he expected me to thrill with joy and interest in the Deutsches Museum. It is a huge place, with bleak stone staircases and forbidding official doors, and when at last we reached a room we found it full of glass cases covering cindery-looking objects. Two long-haired spectacled youths in the last stage of boredom were slouching round silently, and while I followed them I wanted to drop my jaw and blink my eyes and yawn, as they did.

"Nonsense!" said Edward, "Don't follow them. Come into this room now. Here you see beautifully constructed models that must be most interesting to mining engineers. . . ."

"I'm not a mining engineer," I interposed.

"But you must be interested in the way coal is extracted from the bowels of the earth. Here you see—the whole process. . . ."

"I'm not a bit interested in coal till it is flaming in my grate," I said firmly.

"Are you fond of model steam-engines?"

"I'll bear them if you'll promise not to explain them.

You know, Edward, I didn't have a good night, and if you begin about cranks and pistons . . ."

"I won't; there's a room upstairs full of queer-shaped mirrors that will reflect your face in every kind of distorted way."

"Then I won't go near it."

"There are models of old chariots and sedan chairs . . ."

I said I would look at them; so we did. But we were soon back amongst a collection of astronomical instruments that interested Edward immensely. I can't tell you how many other rooms we visited, all giving him joy and me pain. It was a depressing experience.

"We ought never to have married each other," I said as we trudged back to our hotel through the snow.

"You're tired!" said he, and hailed a taxi. I certainly did feel more cheerful after lunch.

"I hope you won't hate the galleries in Rome," I said as we sat as near as we could to the stove in our room while he smoked.

"If I do I shan't go to them," he said cheerfully.

MRS WIDGERY

MR MUNRO felt happy. He had let the adjoining cottage to a widow lady of advanced years, and she meant to live there with one maid to wait on her. The two cottages, semi-detached and in good repair, had been left to Mr Munro about three years ago, and he had inhabited one of them ever since. It was important to him to have quiet neighbours because he was writing a History of Philosophy. Of course you can hardly call that an occupation. Still, there is no harm in it, and a man may be forgiven if he wants suitable surroundings for an innocent pursuit. He had endured a piano and a harmonium on the other side of his thin walls for three years, and when he saw these instruments of his torture carried out of the next-door front garden he wished he had a whole orchestra on which he could express his relief and joy.

During the ensuing month the empty cottage was in the hands of the British workman; and apparently of his children. Mr Munro used to listen to the patter of little feet and the shrill notes of little voices—and wish he was deaf. He blinked thankfully at the furniture-van when it arrived from an adjacent town

with his new tenant's property. Of course the workmen were not out of the house. But when he saw Mrs Widgery he knew they soon would be. She had a forbidding countenance.

A week later, when the hammering had subsided, Mr Munro received a note from Mrs Widgery asking him "what he meant to do about the garden?" He inquired by return what she wanted him to do. He was not a business-like man. She sent round a second note requesting him to call that afternoon. He took his usual walk and came back to Ivy Cottage with a clear idea of the space he meant to devote to the early Greek philosophers. His ideas about the garden were not clear at all.

He was shown into a room decorated with texts of a fulminatory nature. Mrs Widgery sat in a black horsehair chair, with a volume of sermons on her lap. She greeted her landlord without a smile, and he began to wonder what he had done. He hoped politely that she found the cottage comfortable.

"In its present state of repair I regard it as a hole where I may lay my head," she said, sighing. "But we have met to-day to talk of the garden. Can men gather figs of thistles?"

Mr Munro was not prepared to say that they could; therefore he fidgeted with his hat. If his tenant wanted a load of gravel he wished she would say so without quoting the Scriptures. It confounded and offended him.

"When I see the gaps in the hedge . . ." continued Mrs Widgery.

"Oh! the gaps in the hedge," said Mr Munro,

rather glad to have the grievance defined. "The children made those last week."

"You told me you were an unmarried man," said Mrs Widgery in a provocative voice.

Mr Munro explained. But he had an uncomfortable suspicion that his tenant did not believe him, and unless he was careful would crush him with texts about the fate of liars. To stop her he offered to mend the hedge. She said that whatsoever he did should be done heartily, and that she wanted a brick wall.

"I can't afford to buy fruit, so I must grow it," she explained.

Mr Munro said that brick walls were expensive. Then he made hasty calculations while Mrs Widgery talked about his duty to the widow and the orphan. Incidentally she mentioned that all the paths needed new gravel, and that the borders would take a man a week to weed. When Mr Munro demurred to the cost she said that to the righteous good shall be repaid. But she refused to share in the expenses.

Mrs Widgery got her wall and got an enlarged border with it. The men dug the foundations while Mr Munro happened to be away and dug them in his territory. When he complained he was referred to the old lady next door. The builder said she had called him names when he pointed out that the wall put where she wanted it would look cock-eyed.

"Names!" said Mr Munro thoughtfully—"names don't hurt."

"It depends where they come from," said the builder.

So Mr Munro went back to his narrowed garden and

his History of Philosophy, and spent some weeks in peace. He was a little troubled by the curious increase of snails and slugs in his borders, and he could not account for it. But one evening when he was bending regretfully over the remains of a young delphinium, a whole handful of shells with surprised horned heads still emerging from them fell on his hat. He got a big stone and looked over the wall. Mrs Widgery, her trowel still in her hand, looked up. "What is the meaning of this intrusion?" said her scowl.

"Did you throw a lot of snails over the wall just now?" said Mr Munro.

"No. They flew," said Mrs Widgery.

"They hit me."

"How could I guess you were there?"

"But when you throw them over alive like that they eat my plants."

"If I kept them here they would eat my strawberries," said Mrs Widgery, and seemed to consider the incident closed, for she went on weeding.

"Can't you kill them?" asked Mr Munro.

Mrs Widgery rose to her full height and glared at him until he knew he had said something wicked.

"Is it lawful to save life, or to kill?" she cried immediately, and walked to the opposite side of the garden, where she was out of hearing. Mr Munro went indoors.

About a week later he was called from his books to look at an oven that would not get hot. When he saw the fire he suggested more coal, and that made Mrs Widgery so angry that she called him a son of Belial flown with wine, and said she wanted a new

kind of economical kitchener. At this point it becomes difficult to make excuses for Mr Munro. He discovered that Mrs Widgery did not know the source of her own quotation, and he left the cottage smiling, although he did not leave it until he had promised the new kitchener. The truth is that he remembered the harmonium and the piano and wanted to keep his tenant. She was grasping, but mousey-quiet, and in a small way Mr Munro was a man of means.

However, he was to learn that concessions to the ungenerous bring trouble instead of peace. Mrs Widgery's exactions grew. She asked him to put in fruit-trees on the plea that when she left the house she could not take them with her. She insisted on a new garden-gate that would keep his fox-terrier out of her front garden. She was short of cupboards, and pointed to a niche where he might build one. She decided to keep fowls, and though she supposed the birds were her business, she was sure that the fowl-house was his.

Clever as she was, Mrs Widgery did not understand her man. She thought she had got hold of a worm who would never turn. She traded on his reluctance to quarrel or deal hardly with a woman. She could not see that he was a North Countryman, slow to think evil and irreconcilable when once convinced of it. Her awakening came when his fox-terrier killed her cockerel.

"The bird was worth ten pounds," said Mrs Widgery. Her landlord sat opposite her, and the corpse lay sadly between them.

"What?" said Mr Munro. He had "fancied"

poultry in his youth, and still knew something about it.

"Ten pounds," said Mrs Widgery. "Rob not the poor!"

"I am not going to pay ten shillings," said Mr Munro. "I offer two; and as he was killed in my garden when he was scratching up my borders. . . ."

"Prize eggs!" cried Mrs Widgery, growing incoherent in her wrath. "Prize eggs. Three and sixpence each. Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour!"

Mr Munro got up. "The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose," he said. He put a two-shilling piece on the table and turned to go.

"What is this for?" she asked. "I want at least five pounds."

"Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbour," he answered, and went out of the room. He never dealt directly with her again. She tells people her landlord is impious, and she gives him as much trouble as possible.

EMMA

EMMA'S mother had eighteen children. She buried twelve and brought up six on a housekeeping allowance of ten shillings a week. They never went hungry, says Emma, not to call hungry; and, what's more, they never went ragged or unshod. Her mother brought them up most carefully—Emma, who is now twenty-four, is shocked by the rough ways and speech of children in a county four hundred miles from her own. Her speech is not rough, and she uses quaint words most of us only know in poetry. She calls a thrush a mavis and a snail a dodman, and when it drizzles she says it smurs. Her code of morals and manners is rigid. Once her father gave her a hiding because she stole a penny, and it was such an efficient hiding that to the day of her death she will never steal again. Her great idea is that you should keep yourself to yourself and get over the stony places of life without fuss or help from others. "Let's manage alone" is her motto whenever she is offered aid in a domestic crisis; and when aid is thrust on her she is apt to round on you and say it makes more work than it performs.

You would think, to hear Emma talk, that nobody

ever came from such a happy, amusing home as she did; and all her reminiscences confute the vulgar faith that love flies out of the window when poverty comes in at the door. These people were so poor that someone interested in Emma once asked her if they were happy; because nowadays we are all made to believe that happiness depends on money. But Emma knew better, and fired up indignantly.

"My father and mother!" she cried. "There ain't a happier couple anywheres. They've been devoted to each other all their lives."

Their love had withstood all the trials of poverty then, and in the end shipwreck. The father had been bailiff on a large estate for many years, but when his employer died he lost his berth. So, late in life, without knowledge and with insufficient capital, he started shopkeeping in his own village. He soon lost every penny he had saved, and had to shut up his shop; with what sense of failure and presage of want Emma did not say. She just narrated bare facts, and left you to guess at feelings.

"It was after that they took to the poultry," she would say gloomily; and you knew why she spoke of the poultry in that tone, because she had often told you how hard the new trade came on her old mother. It was the plucking, she would explain. Hour after hour, far into the night, the old woman had to sit in a shed plucking ducks and chickens for market, and then hardly threepence apiece to earn, and the pony to feed besides themselves, and seaside visitors running away leaving unpaid bills. There was a tragedy of a boarding-house-keeper who had been supplied all the summer and then did a moonlight

flit that seemed to unfold woe behind woe. Anyhow, it came cruel hard on Emma's father and mother, and if their children had not helped them . . .

"No," says Emma, "I never buys postal orders. Why, father would be wild if the woman at our post-office knew his business. I does it like this," and she shows her lady a letter in which there is a little bit of cardboard and in a slit in the cardboard half a sovereign.

That was before the days of Old-Age Pensions and after Emma arrived at prosperity. She began to earn her own living when she was fourteen, and went as tweeny-maid to a lady in her neighbourhood who took little village girls and trained them. But when she was sixteen she told her father and mother that she was tired of village life and wanted to go to London. She answered an advertisement promising a country girl a comfortable home with two people, no washing, and good wages; just the place to suit her, thought Emma. She was told in reply that the situation she referred to was filled, but that if she would forward the booking-fee another would be found for her at once. When ladies fall into this stale trap the fee ends the matter. Whether they want to find work or find servants, they never hear from the agency again. But "generals" are in such demand that a genuine place was actually offered to Emma, a place with a bank manager and his wife in a suburb. With great difficulty she got her fare and a few clothes together and left home.

When you read of young servant girls who are starved and ill-treated you wonder why they stand it, because you know that situations are many and

servants for them scarce. That is your point of view as an employer, and your point of view makes Emma smile. "What is a country girl of sixteen without friends or money to do?" she asks. "Where is she to go? She stays because she is afraid." That, at any rate, was Emma's case. She was starved and bullied and cruelly over-worked, but she stayed because she was afraid. Yet the place must have been an Inferno. The man drank, the woman nagged, they kept the girl up half the night, though she had to rise at six, and often they left her quite alone at night in the bank. That was what she minded more than ill-usage; to be left alone at night in the bank, expecting thieves and murderers. She shudders now when she tells you of the terrors she endured. She was forbidden to let anyone in when she was left alone in this way, but once her sister arrived unexpectedly, and, seeing how frightened she was, spent the night with her. Some Peeping Tom saw the visitor come and go, told the manager when he got back, and had Emma turned out at an hour's notice with a shilling in her pockets. A girl of less grit and easier fortunes would have spent it on a telegram to her people for help. But that never occurred to Emma. Her people could not help. She went to the nearest Registry Office and took a place as maid-of-all-work with a family of thirteen.

"But, Emma, how could a midge like you do all the work for thirteen people?" asks her gossip.

"Never was happier in my life, m'm," says she staunchly. "They *was* nice people. Thirteen pairs of boots I cleaned every morning, and then there was the rooms and the washing-up. The lady cooked for

herself. When the work was done I played with the children, and I liked that. You never heard a cross word in that house."

Emma hates cross words. When she left the family of thirteen she took a situation where she worked far beyond her strength for years, and yet was happy. They were nice people, too, and once took her to Wales for a holiday. At least she called it a holiday, though even there she cooked and cleaned for three people. She stayed with them on low wages long after she knew that she ought to better herself, and to this day she feels the wrench of leaving them. She got higher wages, lived in a larger house, and was "plain cook" in her next place; but again she was most unhappy. The mistress starved her maids and nagged at them.

"Often and often Smith and me went to bed eating a raw onion because we was that hungry," says Emma. "It's as true as I stand here, m'm."

"But, Emma, by that time you were not a homeless little country girl without a penny in your pocket."

"I 'adn't a penny in my pocket. All my savings went when I 'ad that bad leg. I've often told you, m'm; and how was I to know what she'd say about me if I left? You never do know that, and when I come out of the 'ospital I said I'd never save again; and so I didn't till I come 'ere, and now I've got a nice bit put by. Shall I tell you 'ow much, m'm?"

Emma smiles all over the face that used to be so thin and white, but is getting rosier every day. For her story has taken a turn, and next week she is going to marry uncommonly well and live happy ever after.

"'E don't know yet what I've got in the bank,"

she says delightedly. "'E thinks I'm poor. There, m'm! Forty pounds I've saved since I've been with you. It ain't so bad, is it?"

Considering all the half-sovereigns that have gone on cardboard to the old parents, it isn't bad at all, and I express the pleasure and surprise that are expected of me.

"It's a lot o' money," says Emma. "I'm glad I've got on in the world."

CORONATION DAY IN OUR PARISH

WE were sitting in the garden the other afternoon, when our neighbour, Hiram Polglase, got over the hedge (what we call a hedge you up-country people call a stone wall) and came towards us. He flourished a little red book in his hand, and I could tell by his manner that he had come on business.

We are always glad to see Hiram Polglase whatever he comes for, because he is one of those shrewd, knowledgable men who help you to believe that the country can't be going to the dogs while there are enough of his kind in it; but we don't often get a chat with him, because farmers are busy men. Only last week I had asked him if his work was at a standstill through the drought. "Our work never stops," he said, and if any of you who read are Cornish you will hear the sonorous, musical lilt of his voice, a music that always sounds to me in tune with the call of the waves we listen to on still nights, though we live some miles inland.

So I was a little surprised that when I offered him a chair on a week-day afternoon he took it. I knew he must have something to say, and as he sat down he

began to say it. Hiram Polglase doesn't waste either time or words.

"A free tea for everyone is what we propose," he began, "a free tea and beakers for the children, if the money runs to it, and sports and fireworks and a bonfire."

"It sounds pleasant," I said absently. "But Feast is over."

I suppose I must explain that the dedication of the parish church is celebrated annually in certain Cornish church towns with worship and with great rejoicings lasting several days. It is like a Kirchweih in Germany, the chief festival of the year, and our church town is lucky enough to hold it towards the end of May, when the days are long and the weather is sometimes fine. This year we had a grand Coronation bazaar and a cricket match at Feast.

"To be sure, Feast is over," said Mr Polglase. "I'm talking of Coronation day, ma'am."

"Are we going to celebrate the Coronation in our parish then?" I asked. "I hear they called a meeting in Tregertha about it, and only two people came."

"We had a good meeting last night," said Mr Polglase, expressing his contempt for Tregertha by his smile and glance. "A committee of sixty was appointed: thirty gentlemen and thirty ladies. You are both on it."

"And are we really going to have a free tea . . . all of us . . . from the Colonel to the youngest child in Vellan-lane? What fun!"

"Yes," said Polglase. "We're loyal hereabouts and we mean to have a frolic. Tregertha can do as it pleases."

"Oh! I know we're loyal," I said. "I wanted old Loveday Trewooofe to come and cover me some chairs, and she said it was impossible till after the Coronation, because she was going to paint and paper the whole of her cottage herself for it."

"Colonel is giving all the children a tea the day after," said Mr Polglase. "Colonel" is the person that in an up-country parish you would call the squire. He has a name, but you hardly ever hear anyone use it. I knew about the tea, because weeks ago I had heard his wife say she could not allow him to be outdone by his ancestors, and that an old woman on their property remembered when William IV. was crowned, and how the Colonel's great-grandfather had fireworks on the lawn.

"I'm glad the children are to have two teas," I said.

Hiram Polglase gently opened the little red book and brought me back to the matter in hand.

"Colonel has given us two guineas," he observed.

"What for?"

"For the sports and the fireworks and the bonfire," explained our neighbour patiently, "for the beakers and the free tea."

"H—m," said I. "A guinea each for the Colonel and his wife then, for a cup of tea and a slice of saffron cake . . . and you call that a free tea."

"They do say no one cares about saffron cake now," said Mr Polglase, "and if you ladies decide we are to have none——"

"What!" I cried, "a feast in a Cornish parish and no saffron cake! I wouldn't subscribe. I wouldn't come."

"Do you like it, ma'am?"

"No," I admitted, "I don't belong to like it. I'm not Cornish. I'm only up-country, as you know. But some of the poetry of Cornwall is in your saffron cake, and you mustn't let it go. I've been told that it came to you with the Phœnicians, and when I see the dark eyes of your Cornish maids, their small delicate features, and their look of subtlety, I think of those Phœnician galleys that traded on your coasts when Tyre was greater than Sidon, and when Hiram, its king, gave his friend and neighbour Solomon timber for his palace and his temple. Did you know, Mr Polglase, that your name had come to you from a King of Tyre who lived in the time of David and of Solomon?"

"I suppose so," said Mr Polglase. "My father was Hiram Polglase, and so was his father before him. The name is in the Bible right enough, I know. But you must speak up for the saffron cake on your own committee, ma'am. I've nothing to do with that. The ladies will manage the tea."

"Then the ladies will do the work," said I. And then we inscribed our names in the little red book, and Hiram Polglase went back to his work by the hedge that divides our garden from one of his fields but does not keep his rabbits from eating my alonsoas and carnations.

At the first committee meeting nothing much was settled, but at the second we got on, and for that I think we have to thank Mr Penberthy. We had all been haggling about the programme, because we thought there would not be money enough to carry out the whole of it. Some wanted the grown-ups to pay for their tea; some said that as Colonel and his wife

meant to give the children medals we need not give them beakers; some said sports were unnecessary, and a few proposed to give up the fireworks and the bonfire. When you get a large mixed committee all strongly opposed to one item and determined on another you may babble like that for ever. For instance, the Rector's wife and I, who sat next to each other, would have gone to the stake rather than give up the bonfire.

"I should never believe the King was crowned," one of us whispered to the other.

"Besides, they say a bonfire only costs eight shillings. What is eight shillings in our parish? We know what we can do when we are put to it."

"A bonfire passes in a night, but a beaker lasts for centuries," said a solemn voice in the crowd.

"No one in this parish minds paying for his tea," said another.

"But we've promised everyone a free tea," wailed the collecting committee.

Then Mr Penberthy got on his feet. We all talk about the psychology of crowds nowadays, so you will know what I mean when I tell you that directly he opened his mouth we felt happy and good-tempered. He is the kind of man who by his own easy cheerfulness makes you take a risk and hope for the best.

"I propose," he said, "that we carry out the whole programme just as we did it last time. I propose that nothing be left out. The money will come in right enough. It's very near there already."

We all laughed. What he proposed was what we wanted, but none of us had had the pluck to say it.

"Will you pay the deficit, Mr Penberthy?" shouted someone.

" I'll pay my share," he answered, and sat down.

So we are going to have what someone in churchtown asked for on Coronation Day, a rare old frolic. The children's saffron buns are to weigh a pound apiece, and their beakers will have beautiful coloured portraits of King George and Queen Mary. We have ordered two hundred and fifty pounds of cake for ourselves, besides butter-buns and biscuits. I am glad to say that it has not occurred to any of us to ask for an ox roasted whole and led round decked with ribbons a day or two before his immolation. We eat flesh in Cornwall, but not at our feasts. Tea is our drink, and cake is our diet on high days and holidays. We are a sober people. But when the flames of our bonfire light our square church tower, the one that on fine days can be seen from the Scilly Isles, when, fed by load upon load of furze, we throw our news to distant villages and farms, to ships out at sea and to men watching in lighthouses, then we shall know in this far corner of the Prince's Duchy that it is the evening of Coronation Day, and that in Westminster our King and his Queen have been crowned.

THE HOUSE SENSIBLE

WE are still foolish, but when we were young too we very nearly took a cottage in Surrey. It was the prettiest little cottage you ever saw. The roof was enchanting. We used to stand in the rough copse that would some day be a garden and stare at the roof and agree that we would spend many happy hours under it. But we also agreed that we would take Valeria to look at it, and that was our undoing. For Valeria is practical. As we drove to the cottage from the station she pointed out that a trap to and fro would cost us six shillings each time. We had known it before, but we had not dwelt on it.

"Wait till you see the roof," we cried together. But when she did see it, though she allowed it was pretty, she asked carping questions about bedroom walls. We could not answer them, though we had twice been all over the cottage.

"What do walls matter?" I said. "Wait till you see the view."

. . . . . .

She said that she liked a view but that she also liked a bedstead and a wardrobe in her bedroom,

and that as far as she could judge without going upstairs . . . We both forbade her to judge in such a silly outside way, and then we proudly ushered her into the drawing-room. Himself and I know we ought to call it the Living room. But we are old-fashioned people, and use the words we have belonged to use all our lives. At least we do when they seem good enough. When our Cornish neighbours put "belong" where it sounds expressive it stays in our ears, and we find ourselves using it their way. To come back to our cottage drawing-room, Valeria discovered at a glance that the fireplace was close to the door on one side and the window on the other. The architect had ingeniously placed it in a four-foot length of wall exactly between the two.

"Of course, if you never want to sit near the fire," Valeria conceded.

But like all proper Britons we sit with our toes on the fender whenever we are indoors, even on summer evenings. With Valeria's eyes we now perceived that we could never sit over this fire unless we barricaded the door with one chair and shoved against the window with the other . . . and on cold winter nights. . . . We hastily went into the hall dining-room and showed Valeria where we meant to set our dinner-table. She asked its dimensions, and Himself happened to know them. She then pulled out a tape measure. She had annoyed me already by producing a compass and asserting that the chief rooms faced north.

"You can get your table in," she said, "but either it will touch the stairs or your front door won't open."

We wrangled a long time about this, because I said we could have a folding-table and put it away between meals, but Himself said he hated carving on a table that joggled, and that, as everyone but me knew, the best of folding-tables is apt to joggle. So we went on to the study (again an out-of-date word), a pleasant room with an enormous fireplace and an inglenook. We thought Valeria could not carp much here. She just said that the grate was big enough for a banqueting hall, and she hoped the coalhole was in proportion. Then she got out her tape again, and convinced us that there was not wall-space for a single bookcase of any size. Even in those days our books were legion, so, chastened in spirit, we proceeded to the kitchen.

"I see the architect has put one window south," said Valeria when we looked into the larder, and in this way she went grumbling on. But she seemed quite pleased when she found the draining board on the wrong side of the sink, and with a denunciatory hand she addressed Himself.

"That will show you men ought not to meddle with houses," she cried. "Do you suppose he has ever washed up?"

"Now come upstairs," said I, "and look at the view from the window that will be mine."

. . . . . .

But it never was mine, and Valeria never looked at the view. She was too much occupied in persuading Himself that open rafters, though picturesque, were draughty, that the old beams we so greatly admired were worm-eaten, and that if I could see three counties from my bedroom I could not find a comfortable

place for a bedstead in it. She also distrusted the drains: but I think Valeria had a suspicious nature. I can remember nothing I can describe against the drains.

However, Himself and I agreed that in spite of the wholly satisfying roof, we would not live in the cottage, and I was only reminded of it the other day, because I was asked what I considered the worst fault in the present ordinary builder's house, and what improvement I most desired in future ones. I have a flippant friend who replied that the worst fault was the high rent. But he was a man, and you will never get men to take houses seriously. It is a question every woman must have at heart, and there can be no possible doubt about the answer as regards most houses built by our fathers. Look at their dark, damp basement kitchens; look at their wicked staircases; consider their attics! The wonder is that women can still be found to toil in them. The wonder is that those who do have any nerves and temper left.

Then take the average small suburban house, and see the kitchen there, for the kitchen is the heart of the small household, and when peace and health are not in it everyone in the house will suffer. You need not think that these considerations are trivial and sordid. They are as important to your home life as solid foundations are to your stone walls. But the jerry-builder thinks any God-forsaken corner will do for serving wenches to spend sixteen hours a day in, and he puts them a window half a yard from a blank stucco wall.

. . . . . .

For ourselves, the employers of (more or less) labour, we want sensible houses. Perhaps there has been overmuch talk about the House Beautiful. In me, I admit, the position of the adjective creates a distrust that amounts to a prejudice. I'd as lief call a Preface a Foreword. But Himself and I want a house to live in. As Mr Wells says, this is an age of unsolicited personal confidences, so I will go on to say that we mean to build one, and that we have found an architect. "Here are wall spaces for every bit of your furniture," says he. "Here are two-feet thick granite walls, so that neither heat nor cold can trouble you or sounds annoy; here is your kitchen as pleasant as your dining-room; here are hot and cold taps—here—here—and there (no carrying of water in my houses); here are your cupboards, your tiled hearths and fenders, your tiled sinks, your wide, easy stairs, and your big casement windows that let in the sun. As for the drains, I could dilate on them for an hour if you would take the trouble to understand a few technical terms."

"But I wouldn't," I cry. "I trust to you. I want to know what the roof is like."

"The roof!" says he. "It's plain as plain, and tiled with grey slate."

"Do you mean to say I'm not to have the roof of my dreams?" I ask. "Haven't you given us those drooping red eaves that hang like brows over the ground-floor rooms? Have we no quaint, pointed gables, with little windows high up in them like eyes?"

"You have not," he says. "I've kept within your estimate and given you the rooms you want and the cupboards. Your roof will be plain."

"Can we live in a house with a plain roof?" I ask Himself. "Can it possibly be a House Beautiful?"

"It looks sensible and comfortable," he answers, when he has carefully considered the plan.

EASTER HOLIDAYS

ALL uncles and aunts who have no children should live in the country, because children may be lent to them at Easter, and so once a year they will have real "holidays," just as if they were young again themselves. "Children," as you know, is an elastic word applied to people of all ages, provided their parents are alive. In this case it denotes a man of fifteen from a public school, and another two years younger still preparing. They spend Christmas at home in the London fogs, and August with the family on the South Coast. But at Easter they belong to the uncle and aunt, who some four years ago had a ripping idea, and, unlike most grown-ups, acted on it.

These sage people gave up a dull, comfortable suburban house, stored most of their furniture, paid gas and water rates for the last time, and came without a pang of regret to live in a little West Country cottage. That, in fact, was how the Easter holidays began.

. . . . . .

The elder boy arrived about a fortnight after they got in, and took possession at once. The uncle and aunt look after the place for fifty-two weeks in the year, but he is the real owner. It will even shape

his career, which must enable him to retire with a pension in middle life and come here to live. Someone has suggested that an Indian judgeship might suit him.

If you had seen the cottage when the uncle and aunt first came you would not wonder that a man of eleven, bred in London, liked the look of it. No one had lived in it lately, and what is now a garden was then a wilderness, traversed in an engaging way at all angles and levels by old stone walls. Outside the garden there is wild Cornish moorland and farm fields, hedged, like the cottage, by granite walls, the home of ferns, stonecrops, thyme, and primroses. The man of eleven set to work at once, with his uncle, delving in the wilderness, and the first path they made still meanders, as they cleared it, between two bits of rock garden.

Those first Easter holidays seemed to pass like an April shower. Before they had time to look round the neighbourhood the young voice had gone again, and the uncle and aunt missed it as you who live in cities miss the song of the thrush. For a year they did their duty by the place in the boy's absence, and were pleased to find when he came again that on the whole he thought it improved. Perhaps rather too much had been cut down in front of the cottage. Anyone now could see a certain clump of pink primroses that last year he alone had discovered.

. . . . . .

This year, for the first time, both boys come. They arrive by the Riviera express, and as they tumble out of the train loaded with fishing-rods and handbags

they engage immediately in one of those whirling and breathless arguments associated in two elderly minds with Easter holidays. For the aunt wants to know where their luggage is, how their parents are, and whether they have had tea. But the uncle, who (she says) has no more sense than the boys, is talking before their feet touch the platform about beehive huts and trout streams, because one boy is an antiquarian and both boys are fishy.

"We are going to get up at five every day," says the elder boy; "I have brought my alarum."

That, the aunt says, she will not stand. The inner walls of the cottage are thin, and she knows by experience that one alarum would wake her, and twenty would leave both boys peacefully asleep till the maid and then the uncle hammer them out of bed at breakfast time. So, narrating and discussing and harmoniously wrangling, the four of them climb Paul Hill, slowly following the cab carrying luggage, and when they get to the top of the hill they stop to look back at the bay and the Mount. Then between golden hedges and accompanied by the evensong of birds they drive on till they reach the cottage, the prettiest, friendliest cottage in this corner of the West. Headlong the boys dash out of the cab and race each other up and down the nine little gardens to see what their viceroys have done in them since last year. There is a large new frame, full now of seed boxes. There are new seats made by the uncle, who is a carpenter. There are blue primroses.

"I like yellow and pink ones better," says the elder boy, and then observes that he is hungry.

"We often have chicken and apricot tart and clotted

cream when we are by ourselves," says the aunt to the uncle that night, "but then they never seem at all thrilling."

And next day the miracle is renewed.

. . . . . .

All through these three weeks life has an unwonted glow. None of us would own it, but cantankerous people call our climate damp and tricky. There certainly is a mist sometimes, and if you have eyes you watch the cows and the trees through it and never mind. Still, when we wake to a fine day we quickly pack up lunch and tea and start for Penberth, Porthgwarra or Lamorna, all in paradise.

We would not accept the perfumes of Arabia in exchange for the scent of gorse on a fine April day, when the sun has drawn and warmed it and the sea breeze carries it as we walk along the cliffs looking for the corner in which we mean to eat our hungry lunch. After lunch, when young minds and old ones are in that golden doze that is so restful and so sane, we lie on the short turf full of thrift and of little blue squills, and we stare at the blue, blue Cornish sea flapping lazily to-day against the granite rocks.

"Your uncle talks of giving up the cottage and taking a flat in London," says the aunt, who thinks they all want rousing.

The howl of anger and dismay that answers this blasphemy frightens off the gulls flapping undecidedly above the crumbs spread on purpose for them.

"Give up our cottage!" cries one boy.

"Let anyone else have my garden!" says the other. "You never could. Besides, London is beastly."

"We could not spend the Easter holidays in London," they say both together.

For the moment that seems to settle it. The uncle, who is sleepily smoking, does not even trouble to explain that if he took a flat he would keep on the cottage too. He just winks at the boys, and they understand him.



"Laura and Trudi" appeared in "The Cornhill Magazine." The other short stories and articles appeared in "The Woman at Home," "The Sketch," "The Illustrated London News," "The Westminster Gazette," and "The Daily Chronicle."

PRINTED BY NEILL AND CO., LTD., EDINBURGH

JUNE 15

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